Piccolo

CAROL BEACH YORK

Beware of this Shop

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Carol Beach York, who was born in Chicago, is a full-time writer with many outstanding books for children to her credit. Several of her stories for younger children have been published in England as well as the United States. She now lives with her daughter in a big old house in Harvey, Illinois.

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Carol Beach York in Piccolo

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Carol Beach York

Beware of this Shop

Piccolo Books

No character in this book is intended to represent any actual person; all the incidents of the story are entirely fictional in nature.

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for Mother
whose love and encouragement
have helped so much for so many years

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Part 1

The Gold Ring

One

Ashwood, Massachusetts, 1892

During the night Ash Park lay pale with fog. In the nearby streets, lamps glowed dimly, haloed with rings of mist. Occasionally a late-night carriage or buggy came ghostlike past the darkened houses and glimmering fence rails. No other sound than the fading fall of horses' hooves disturbed the silence. And as the long night wore on, even the latest night-journeyers were safely home, and then there were no sounds at all.

Towards morning the fog began to grow thin. Houses came slowly into view around the park . . . Auburn Street . . . Latham Street . . . Farring Road.

And Marley Street, where the shop was.

By midmorning a pale late-fall sun appeared. A stray dog sat for a moment by the shop doorway, ears pricked up intently, and then ran on.

Hester and Isabel discovered the shop quite by accident as they were walking towards the park from an errand to Isabel's dressmaker.

The girls did not usually come down Marley Street, and they stopped for a glance in the shop window, imprinting their own reflections momentarily upon the glass – Hester slender and dark-haired, adjusting the collar of her coat, Isabel with a flower on her hat, leaning closer to the window the better to see.

They might not have gone into the shop at all if the man inside had not beckoned to them.

Beyond their reflections, the shop window was neatly arranged with vases and ink bottles, candle snuffers, writing paper, teapots, and painted china plates, across which the

sunlight lay in streaks like fingers pointing in.

The interior of the shop was lower than street level, and the man stood inside peering up at them silently from under bushy brows. He was a small, hunch-shouldered man, dressed in a pair of dark trousers and a grey sweater over a green vest; and he crooked his finger at them when he saw them looking in.

'Hester, he wants us to come in – let's do,' Isabel said impulsively.

It was easy for Isabel to say. She always had spending money.

'I can't buy anything,' Hester objected.

But Isabel had already moved to the door and had her hand on the knob.

'You can look at things,' she said appealingly. 'Oh, come on, Hester, just for a few minutes.'

Aunt Sophie would be cross, Hester thought. It was nearly time for lunch, and Aunt Sophie did not like to wait for meals. Even now Betsy was probably setting out plates and silver in the quiet dining room on Auburn Street.

But today Aunt Sophie would be cross no matter what time Hester returned. She hadn't wanted Hester to go with Isabel to the dressmaker's in the first place. 'Gadding about,' Aunt Sophie called it, with a sniff of disapproval. She thought Isabel Abbott was frivolous, and that she possessed too many new dresses and too much spending money, and had too much freedom to wander the streets.

'That girl has not a serious thought in her head,' was Aunt Sophie's favourite end to any discussion of Isabel.

But serious or not, the thought in Isabel's head at the moment was the shop on Marley Street and the happy coincidence of having some money with her if she should see anything she wanted to buy.

A bell rang over the doorway as they entered, and Hester's

first impression was that the shop was darker than she had expected it to be from the outside. For a moment she thought that the man's beckoning to them was a mistake, that the shop was not open for business after all.

But the man was turning from the window to greet them, and Isabel had already started down the four steps leading into the shop.

Tap, tap, tap, came the sound of Isabel's steps on the stairs. She flounced along, her skirts rustling pleasantly, and drew off her gloves. Her eyes darted about the shop with interest. There was nothing Isabel loved more than shops, although she could see at once that this one was not as fancy as Mrs Banning's The Ladies' Assistant on Thurmond Street, or the book-and-toy shop by the park.

Hester followed down the stairs more slowly, and behind them the tinkling of the bell faded and stopped.

The hunch-shouldered man in the green vest came towards them, making a bowing motion with his head.

'It is not often I have two such lovely young ladies in my shop,' he said.

His voice had a foreign sound to it, but they could not tell where he came from.

'We just want to look around a few minutes,' Isabel said, imitating her mother's manner in shops.

The shopkeeper made a gesture with his hand.

'By all means look around. You will find I have many unusual things.'

Isabel strolled between the tables and stopped for a moment to examine a vase.

'Nothing looks very unusual to me,' she whispered to Hester. But she would likely buy something before she left, Hester thought. Money slid through Isabel's fingers with lightning speed.

Isabel replaced the vase and went on.

Hester followed, with the lesser interest of someone who

does not have money to spend. There were music boxes and glass fruit bowls, candlesticks, watch fobs, scissors and pens, a few small framed paintings. Rather depressing paintings, Hester thought. She could not imagine anyone wanting to buy one and hang it up in a room to look at every day.

As they browsed, the shopkeeper seated himself on a stool behind the counter. Light from the shop window brightened a display tray of rings and brooches on the counter before him.

'Oh, look at the rings, Hester!'

Isabel had found what interested her most. Immediately she laid her gloves aside on the counter and began to try on the rings.

Hester stood beside her friend, wishing she had some money to buy something. A ring perhaps. Or a brooch. As she looked around, she caught sight of a china shepherdess on a shelf behind the counter, and she seemed to stare right into the eyes of the figurine for a moment as into some unknown place of silence and mystery.

'I see you are admiring my little sheep girl.'

The man lifted the figure from the shelf and placed it carefully on the counter before Hester.

'Isn't it pretty,' Isabel murmured absently. But her attention returned at once to the rings.

Hester touched the figure with surprise. Its eyes were only painted china after all, and the glazed finish was cold and smooth against her fingers.

'She is very inexpensive,' the shopkeeper said persuasively.

He stood with his head to one side watching as Hester looked at the figurine. It was small, only about eight inches high, so it couldn't cost *too* much. But that didn't really matter. She had no money, and she did not need a china shepherdess. If she had any money, she should buy a new pair of gloves. She should go around to Arlington's and buy gloves . . .

'How do you like this one, Hester?'

Isabel held out her hand so that Hester could see the ring she had put on. It was a narrow gold band, twisted like a braid.

'I have many lovely rings,' the shopkeeper said.

Isabel smiled. Then she said, 'This shop hasn't been here long, has it?'

'No,' the man replied in his soft foreign voice, 'not long.'

'I don't think I've ever seen it before,' Isabel said. She knew all the shops, of course, Mrs Banning's and the book shop and Tremont's.

'Not long,' the man repeated. He looked steadily at Isabel with brooding eyes. 'But then, what is time?'

Behind them the bell over the shop door rang. A woman had come in with a child, a girl of six or seven with long straw-coloured curls falling about her shoulders. Demurely the child followed her mother down the steps into the shop, and the woman said, 'Good morning, Mr Mordrian. How are you today?'

His voice was pleasant as he greeted the woman, and he smiled at the child, who was trudging behind her mother between the tables. The little girl's hands were safely tucked into a velvet muff, and she did not touch a thing.

'I think I'll buy this one after all,' Isabel said.

After trying on several of the other rings, she had again taken up the gold braid.

'Are you going to buy the figure?' she asked Hester.

'I haven't any money,' Hester answered matter-of-factly. But she couldn't help sighing. What little spending money Aunt Sophie gave her was usually gone so fast, even though she tried to be careful.

'It's so pretty,' Isabel said.

She lifted the shepherdess and turned it around in her hands before setting it down again. Then she said generously:

'I'll lend you the money if you want it, Hester.'

'I don't really have to have it,' Hester said. She could see that the man behind the counter was watching the woman and the child as they made their way between the tables of wares. The woman was frowning to herself because she did not see what she wanted . . . Startled, Hester looked down at the figurine. There had been no sound, yet she felt as though someone had called her name. The blue china eyes looked up at her blankly.

'Oh, take it, Hester,' Isabel was saying. 'I'm going away Thursday for the wedding, and I won't need the money back for a long time.'

A pang of loneliness touched Hester then, to be reminded that Isabel was to go away so soon. She would be gone a month or maybe longer. What would Hester do all those dreary dull days until Isabel returned? 'You can visit Christina,' Isabel had teased, and the parlour at Christina's house seemed to be around Hester now, with its plum-coloured sofa and Christina admiring herself in the mirror over the mantel.

'I'm going to wear the ring,' Isabel said to the shopkeeper. 'And you may wrap the figurine for my friend.'

She drew on a glove leisurely.

Nearby there was a soft clinking sound as the woman replaced a teapot she had been examining.

'Hester, look at that!'

Isabel was pointing to a place farther along the shelf where the china figure had stood. Set somewhat apart from the other objects on the shelf was a metal cage about ten inches square. The brass toad behind the bars was small enough to hold in the palm of a hand, but it had a hideous, bloated appearance. Below the bulging eyes a thick tongue hung out of the mouth. The brass had darkened and lost its sheen, and the crouched form repelled Hester as much as a live, warty toad leaping at her from the shelf would have done.

'Who would buy *that?*' Hester blurted out rather bluntly.

Mr Mordrian glanced up from wrapping Hester's parcel. He turned his head towards the shelf where Isabel was pointing.

'That is not for sale,' he said quietly.

'It's so ugly. I mean—' A note of apology crept into Isabel's voice. She was always speaking before she thought.

But the shopkeeper was not offended. 'I do not find it so,' he said.

He tied a piece of twine around Hester's package, and the girls watched in awkward silence.

'I don't seem to see what I was looking for.' The woman came towards the counter shaking her head.

Mr Mordrian took Isabel's money and handed Hester the package containing the china shepherdess.

'What was it you were looking for?' he asked. His eyes passed the woman and rested for a moment on the child.

As Hester and Isabel left he was handing the child a few red-and-white-striped peppermints from a glass jar.

'Don't eat all that candy before lunch,' the woman said to the child. 'You'll be sick.'

Two

The girls proceeded down Marley Street to Ash Park. It had grown colder since they had set out that morning, and the sunlight was fading. The park stretched ahead bleak and cheerless. In the summer there were ducks on the pond and children sailed paper boats at the shallow edges. But the park was empty now of the playing summertime children, the strolling nursemaids with babies, and the old woman who sold flowers. Most of the leaves had already fallen from the ash trees, which had given the town and the park their names, and a solitary delivery wagon rolled by along the leaf-strewn walks. Before Hester and Isabel were halfway across the park, the sunlight had altogether gone, vanished like the summer children and the old woman selling flowers and the ducks on the pond.

They parted at Auburn Street at the edge of the park, somewhat subdued by the darkening day and the cold walk under the bare trees.

'I'll be packing this afternoon,' Isabel said. Her mood was brightening now that they were through the park; she did not like it this time of year, empty and grey and cold. But now she would soon be home in her house, by warm fires and soft armchairs; and she would start packing for the trip to Saratoga Springs and a cousin's wedding.

Hester looked cold, and Isabel put her hand on her friend's arm.

'Come and help me pack if you can.'

'If I can,' Hester promised.

Isabel went off down Finch Street, and Hester hurried homeward alone, planning how she could slip out again after lunch and go to Isabel's. It would be fun to see the bustle of activity that preceded a family's trip. Dresses strewn over

beds and chairs, Isabel's little brother Charles dashing around underfoot. Mrs Abbott always had nut bread at tea, and the parlour there was so pretty.

The door of Aunt Sophie's house clanged heavily behind Hester, and her surroundings were in sharp contrast to what had just been in Hester's pleasant thoughts of tea in the Abbotts' parlour. She saw the stiff dark chairs of Aunt Sophie's parlour, and the stern faces of Aunt Sophie's father and mother, frowning down at her in their portraits above the fireplace. The curtains were open, but the sky had grown so grey that the whole room was cast into gloom at midday.

Aunt Sophie sat before the fire, stout and tidy, her sewing in her lap. Across from her in a high-backed rocking chair sat a thin, elderly lady with pale eyes. She was severely dressed in a black dress with a brooch pinned to the front and a collar rising high enough to conceal most of her scrawny neck. In another chair sat a woman a few years younger but otherwise so alike her she might have been a mirror image, including brooch, black dress, and pale eyes.

Hester groaned inwardly. The Pynns had come for lunch.

'The Pynns have come for lunch,' Aunt Sophie said. She turned just enough in her chair to show Hester that it inconvenienced her to have to turn.

Hester moved into the room a few inches and smiled politely at the pale-eyed guests. At least their presence had taken Aunt Sophie's mind from the time. It was already past the usual lunch hour, and no word had been said that Hester was late.

The Pynn sisters nodded silently, the elder observing to herself that Hester had grown no prettier, the younger thinking she felt a draught from Hester's coming in from the hall.

'Hester has been traipsing all over town this morning,' Aunt Sophie said. Her mouth pinched together over the words.

The Misses Pynn looked at Hester with their pale near-sighted eyes.

Hester was not sure which was worse, lunch alone with Aunt Sophie or lunch with Aunt Sophie and the two elderly neighbour ladies.

'And what's that you've got?' Aunt Sophie spied the package from the shop.

'It's a shepherdess.'

Hester began to untie the string, and Aunt Sophie said, 'Well, come forward where we can see it.' She bit off her thread sharply and frowned at Hester.

'Isabel and I found a little shop when we were coming home. We've never stopped there before, and Isabel bought a ring.'

'Just what she needs most, I'm sure,' Aunt Sophie remarked dryly.

'Young girls are so wasteful,' the elder Miss Pynn said wisely. She rocked in her chair, *creak, creak, creak.*

When Hester had unwrapped the china figure, Aunt Sophie looked at it without interest.

'I can't see that that's much,' she said.

The elder Miss Pynn pursed her lips and creaked her chair.

Oh, thought Hester, lunch will be a thousand hours long.

'What did it cost?' the younger Miss Pynn asked. 'It's rather pretty . . .' But she said this as though she were not quite sure, and a few more creaks from her sister's chair convinced her that she had spoken rashly.

'Hester squanders her money, I'm afraid,' Aunt Sophie said, snapping off another length of thread. 'When the money's gone, the money's gone. Isn't that right?' Sharp-eyed she looked to the elder Miss Pynn for agreement and was not disappointed.

'Money, money,' sighed the elder Miss Pynn glumly. She

shook her head and rocked in the chair by the flickering firelight. *Creak, creak, creak.*

But it is an ill wind that blows no good. Preoccupied with the Pynn sisters in a discussion of a new needlework pattern, Aunt Sophie raised no objection when lunch was finished and Hester said she would like to go to the Abbotts' and help Isabel with her packing.

'If you must gad about,' Aunt Sophie said, 'you may get me some thread at Mrs Banning's on your way. I've nearly used up the last of mine.'

'It's going to rain,' the younger Miss Pynn suggested sadly.

But Hester flew out gratefully. Five minutes to Mrs Banning's, five minutes more to Isabel's from there, and all the long dreary lunch would be forgotten. Hester walked along happily. Maybe she could not go to Saratoga for a month of parties and a wedding celebration, but her spirits rose nonetheless. *I will keep a diary one day of all my secret loves*, she thought as she came to the end of Auburn Street and turned the corner . . . *and lock it up with a golden key I will wear around my neck on a golden chain . . . I will eat muffins in the morning and watch the fire dancing on the hearth* . . . There was Mrs Banning's just ahead . . . *I will write poetry at night when everyone else is asleep, and put daisies in silver bowls on tables spread with white damask and flickering with candlelight* . . . There was the shop door.

'Why, hello, Hester.'

'Hello, Mrs Banning.'

But instead of the scene of activity and excitement she had expected at the Abbott house, Hester found Isabel sitting alone in the parlour gazing into the fire.

'I've got the worst old headache,' Isabel said wearily. 'I won't do any packing today.'

'Oh, Isabel,' Hester murmured sympathetically. 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

'No . . .' Isabel lifted a hand wanly. The pretty new ring was shining brightly on her finger.

Hester sank down on the carpet beside the chair and held her hands to the fire.

'It's getting cold out.'

Isabel managed a smile. 'I can see your cheeks are red.'

'I've just been to Mrs Banning's getting thread for Aunt Sophie.'

Isabel did not seem to hear. She was staring into the fire again.

'Winter's coming,' she said softly.

Hester felt suddenly sad. The day had started out so happily, going to the dressmaker's. They had laughed when they met Rupert Lawrence on the way, for they knew he was secretly in love with Isabel, and he was so awkward in her presence he could hardly think of anything to say. After they had left Rupert, they had bought candies at the sweetshop and licked their fingers clean before going into the dressmaker's, like little girls. They had gone shopping and bought a gold ring and a china shepherdess. And now, winter was coming.

She looked up at Isabel, sitting beside the fire so beautiful and forlorn, with her head hurting.

And she said, 'Oh, Isabel, winter's a long way off yet. And anyway, think of your trip and the wedding and everything.'

'I know,' Isabel murmured. 'It's just that my head hurts so.'

A log shifted on the fire and sank, sending up a tiny shower of sparks.

Beyond the windows the afternoon continued to darken, and a few last leaves from the trees fluttered by the panes.

Three

Less cheerfully than she had come, Hester at last started homeward again, the package of Aunt Sophie's thread tucked into her coat pocket.

Auburn Street was veiled in the fading daylight, and across the street lay Ash Park and the carriages going along the leaf-strewn paths. The cold which had crept into the air during the early afternoon increased now as evening approached, and morning seemed a hundred years away. And worst of all, in two days Isabel was leaving for Saratoga.

'I can't see the point in all that travelling this time of year, even to a wedding,' Aunt Sophie announced at dinner, peering at Hester across the silver candlesticks that stood forever in the centre of the dining-room table.

'I imagine it's fun,' Hester said defensively.

'I suppose Isabel will be getting married next,' Aunt Sophie said.

'I don't think she'll get married anytime soon, Aunt Sophie. There isn't anyone she specially cares about.'

But maybe Isabel would meet someone at Saratoga, at the wedding, Hester thought to herself. How romantic that would be!

Aunt Sophie ate on placidly.

The clock in the hall struck the half hour.

Then Aunt Sophie said, 'Isabel would be better off at Miss Emory's school. I can't think why her mother did not send her back this year.'

'But Isabel hated Miss Emory's, Aunt Sophie. The food was awful, and she said the girls never did anything that was fun.'

'Schools are not for eating and merrymaking.'

Hester ate in silence.

'Another year or two of Miss Emory's influence would have been very beneficial to Isabel, in my opinion,' Aunt Sophie continued. She studied Hester across the table a moment, and added: 'I'd send you, if the cost weren't so dear.'

Hester felt caught between Aunt Sophie's stinginess and the dread of Miss Emory's school. Or was 'saved' a better word? Saved from Miss Emory's poor food and rigid discipline by Aunt Sophie's tight purse strings.

Which was worse? Hester thought disconsolately, picking at her food. Sometimes she thought any change, even going to Miss Emory's, would be better than the endless sameness of days on Auburn Street. The only fun she had was with Isabel, and now Isabel was going away.

And winter was coming.

A vision of early twilights and evenings spent trying to get her needlework to meet Aunt Sophie's approval overwhelmed Hester.

'Everything is dear these days,' Aunt Sophie concluded.

She rang for Betsy to serve the dessert, which was only baked apple, because things were dear.

That night as she prepared for bed, Hester placed the figurine of the shepherdess on the table by her bed. It seemed to be watching from painted blue eyes as she undressed in the lamplight, and glancing at it Hester felt a small sense of comfort. It was something Isabel had wanted her to have.

But this thought did not cheer her for long, and Hester went to bed with a feeling of deep discontent and tossed restlessly a long time before she finally fell asleep.

Several times during the night she awakened with a start, her body damp with perspiration and her mind gripped by some terror of the dream from which she had just been roused . . . But what had she been dreaming? She tried to

remember even as she sank back into fitful sleep again.

And then she awoke once again, trembling, and this time the dream came back to her after all . . . She was standing at the top of a long flight of stairs. They seemed to stretch endlessly before her, a hundred or more. And there below, far away down the hundred steps, stood a hunched dwarflike figure in a green vest, beckoning to her to come down to where he stood below in the darkness.

Hester shrank back against her pillow, closing her eyes tight to shut out the memory of the hundred stairs and the darkness there, and the dwarf beckoning her to come down . . . He seemed to be in the room with her, and her eyes flew open. But there was no one in the room. Beside the bed the china figure stood where she had placed it, a faint light falling across the face and the blue-painted china eyes, although the rest of the room lay in darkness.

In the morning Hester awoke knowing she had slept poorly. A great weariness possessed her so that she felt she had hardly been to bed at all.

She wanted to sleep more, but she forced herself to sit up and push back the covers. Aunt Sophie did not accept excuses for tardiness at breakfast.

'We are not running a hotel,' was Aunt Sophie's favourite phrase.

The china shepherdess looked ugly in the morning light. Why had she ever bought it? Hester wondered, lifting it from the table and turning it in her hands. The colours were darker than she remembered; the face was not even pretty, and it was crudely made. And now she owed Isabel for it and her spending money was so skimpy – oh, why had she been so stupid!

Reluctantly Hester dragged herself out of bed. Betsy had not been in to light the fire, and the room was cold. Hester drew aside the curtains and gazed down into the park. A blue mist hung in the air. It was going to rain.

And it was Tuesday, Hester remembered with a sigh. She was to accompany Aunt Sophie to tea with Mrs Commerly, who had a prim, scratchy-chaired parlour, and served strong, bitter tea and currant cake that always tasted stale.

What a wretched day, Hester thought dejectedly. She began to dress with listless motions, and it seemed to her that wherever she moved in the room, the eyes of the ugly china figure followed her.

Why had she bought it? In the shop it had seemed pretty, and she had wanted to buy *something.* She wished it would stop watching her, ugly thing. She stuck out her tongue at it as she left the room, and even in the hallway and going down the stairs she seemed to feel the eyes following her, pressing close upon her back.

Behind the silver candlesticks, Aunt Sophie was already at her place.

'You haven't forgotten we are to have tea this afternoon with Mrs Commerly?'

'No, I haven't forgotten,' Hester answered meekly, slipping into her own chair none too soon, for here came round-faced Betsy with the toast and eggs.

No, I haven't forgotten. Stale currant cakes and bitter tea. And Isabel is going to Saratoga, to a wedding.

'I hope we do not have to go to Mrs Commerly's in the rain,' Aunt Sophie fussed. She frowned at Betsy to show her disapproval of the toast, which was a shade darker than Aunt Sophie's liking. And when the girl had disappeared again, Aunt Sophie said:

'You would think anyone could learn to do a simple thing like toasting bread properly.'

Below came the sound of a pan cover clattering to the kitchen floor, and Aunt Sophie shuddered and closed her eyes. Household help was one of her many trials in life. She had had several girls in the last few years in a seemingly hopeless effort to find someone who would 'do'. Betsy, with

her two left hands, was proving to be no better than the rest.

The thought of comparing these domestic difficulties with Mrs Commerly later in the day gave Aunt Sophie some ray of comfort, however, and she bit into the too-dark toast with resignation.

Four

Mrs Commerly's tea was as bitter as ever, the currant cake as stale. A few slices of cinnamon bread added nothing, crumbling dry as dust in Hester's mouth.

'Such a dreadful day,' Mrs Commerly was observing, as the rain pelted the parlour windows.

She sat solid as a mountain in a plain dark dress, a cameo pinned to the front moving up and down as she sighed over the weather.

'I knew it was going to rain,' Aunt Sophie said. 'My legs were stiff this morning.'

The only other guest was Mrs Adder, who did not believe in idle hands and always crocheted straight through tea. 'Ashwood winters are so damp,' Mrs Adder said.

The parlour was decorated in brown and dark green, fashionable colours but oppressive on a rainy day. A life-size china dog guarded the hearth, and the mantel was arranged with a group of small clocks collected by Mrs Commerly's husband. Mrs Commerly herself collected music boxes. They were Hester's only source of entertainment when she came to tea with Aunt Sophie, and by and by, as the ladies talked, she went to the cabinet where they were kept.

Mrs Commerly did not object to the boxes being played by guests, and Hester wound them one by one, sitting apart in her corner by a rain-spattered windowpane.

'Did you hear that the Leightons are going to Paris?' Mrs Adder asked.

'Indeed?' Aunt Sophie had *not* heard.

Their voices receded into the distance as Hester found the music box she liked best. It had a silver cover and played a Viennese waltz. She listened to it dreamily.

'You always play that one. Is it your favourite?'

Mrs Commerly had come up beside her unannounced.

Hester started. Who would have thought such a great hulk of a woman as Mrs Commerly could move so silently?

'Listen everyone,' Mrs Commerly said suddenly, turning from the music boxes to include Aunt Sophie and Mrs Adder at the tea table. 'I must tell you of the strangest experience I had not long ago with my music boxes.'

Aunt Sophie paused with teacup in mid-air, and Mrs Adder looked from her crocheting. Mrs Commerly's tone of voice promised an interesting story.

'I bought a little wooden music box at a shop only a few weeks ago,' Mrs Commerly said. 'I'd never heard the tune before, so I can't tell you what it was, but at first I thought it was very pretty.'

Hester closed the silver lid and the Viennese waltz ended.

Into the silence Mrs Commerly continued. 'Well, after I'd had the box only a day or so, I began to get very tired of that tune. You see, I could still hear it in my head even when I wasn't playing it. It was there all the time, going around and around in my head. It made me quite nervous.'

'I should think so,' Mrs Adder agreed.

Aunt Sophie looked sceptical.

'Finally one afternoon I was sitting here trying to write some letters, and that tune kept going over and over in my mind. So you know what I did? I came right over to this cabinet, and I opened it, and I took out that music box and threw it into the fire.'

'You threw it away?' Aunt Sophie was shocked at such extravagance.

'I was rather surprised myself,' Mrs Commerly admitted, nodding at the recollection of her act. 'But I didn't think a moment about the money I'd spent on it. I just threw it into the fire and watched it burn.'

'Hmph,' was Aunt Sophie's only comment.

'You could have taken it back to the shop and asked for another,' Mrs Adder suggested.

Regret flickered momentarily over Mrs Commerly's heavy face. 'I never thought of that,' she said.

'Anyway,' she added after a pause, 'I never heard the tune again. It was a great relief.'

'I'd have taken it back,' Aunt Sophie declared. 'Poor merchandise should be replaced.'

She did not like speaking across the distance of the room to the corner where Mrs Commerly stood beside the cabinet, and she did not hold with such fanciful nonsense as Mrs Commerly's story had been. She returned her attention to her teacup and her interrupted conversation with Mrs Adder.

'I have tunes go around in my head sometimes,' Hester said, looking up understandingly at Mrs Commerly.

Mrs Commerly had been about to go back to her chair by the tea tray, but she paused and shook her head slowly. 'Not like this, you don't. I know what you mean, but this was quite different. Just that tune, that *tune* all that time – it could drive a person crazy. And it was only a plain wooden box, not up to the rest of my collection at all. I don't know why I bought it in the first place.'

Why did I buy that figurine? Hester thought. It's not even pretty.

'What kind of a shop was it, Mrs Commerly?'

'Just an ordinary little shop. Candlesticks and writing paper, you know the kind of place. I'd never been there before. I don't think it's been open long. I hope I have better luck if I shop there again.'

'Was it in Marley Street?'

'Why, yes, that's just where it was,' Mrs Commerly said after thinking a moment. 'I remember because I was coming from my sister's, and she lives on the next street. I don't

usually go down Marley Street, and I can't think why I did that day. But that's where it was all right, Marley Street.'

That night alone in her room, Hester picked up the figure of the shepherdess. It looked even uglier than it had that morning . . . surely nobody would want to buy *this.* And yet Hester had bought it.

A music box that wouldn't let you stop hearing its tune . . . *I don't know why I bought it,* Mrs Commerly had said. A plain wooden music box, surely not anything to compare with her other music boxes; she had said so herself.

A music box that wouldn't let you stop hearing its tune. *It could drive a person crazy,* Mrs Commerly had said.

And a figurine that seemed to be watching every move you made . . . Hester shivered, recalling the pale light that had fallen across the face of the china shepherdess when she had awakened in the dark with her awful dreams the night before.

There was something wrong with that shop and the things in it. Hester felt a chill sweep over her. Why hadn't she realized it before? Those pictures on the wall – forests at night with small animals skulking in the shadows of twisted trees, weed-grown landscapes with decaying castles above which bats wheeled in dying light. An ugly brass toad in a cage. The old shopkeeper watching the child as she followed her mother about the shop.

And he had given the little girl some candy.

Don't eat all that candy before lunch, the mother had said. *You'll be sick.*

Hester stood up suddenly and smashed the figure of the shepherdess against the fire grate. It shattered into tiny pieces, and yet the face, the eyes, remained whole, staring up at Hester. She ground down upon this last piece with the heel of her shoe. There. The eyes could not watch her any longer.

A sense of freedom filled the room. A sense of release. Things were not so bad any more – the rainy night sweeping in about the house, or even the fact that Isabel was going to Saratoga. It was only for a month or so; she would be back soon, in time for the Christmas holidays. They would have as much fun as ever. Christina Lawrence was having a party, and Hester and Isabel were going. There were many truly happy things in Hester's life.

She wished it were not so late in the evening. She would have liked to run over to Isabel's and tell her about the figurine and about Mrs Commerly's music box.

And then Hester remembered that Isabel had bought something in the shop too.

She had bought the gold ring from the tray on the counter . . .

Five

Early the next morning Hester hurried to Isabel's house in Finch Street.

Mrs Abbott came to the door herself, an indication that there was something more pressing occupying the maid.

She stood in the doorway, an abstracted expression on her usually calm face. Beyond her, the hall floor gleamed from a fresh scrubbing and a blue china bowl reflecting in a long mirror cast a shimmer of blueness upon the polished wood.

Perhaps she was too early, Hester thought. She had slipped out of the house while Aunt Sophie was supervising Betsy in cleaning the lamps. But Isabel should be up early, packing for the trip.

'Is Isabel up?'

Mrs Abbott drew back in the hallway, motioning Hester to follow. Cold air was coming in with Hester standing on the steps, red-cheeked from her brisk walk over from Auburn Street.

Mrs Abbott closed the door after Hester, and shut out the cold. She was quite like Isabel, with delicate features and fair hair. She must have looked just like Isabel when she was a girl, Hester had always thought. But this morning there were lines of strain around her eyes and at the corners of her mouth, as though she had not slept well.

'I thought Isabel would be up early, packing,' Hester said.

There was a silence in the house that made her feel she had intruded.

'Isabel has been sick,' Mrs Abbott said. 'I doubt that we'll get off to Saratoga tomorrow after all.'

The silence of the house pressed closer around Hester.

'What's wrong with her?'

Mrs Abbott shook her head. 'I don't know. I'm waiting for the doctor now.'

Hester stared blankly at Mrs Abbott.

I kept hearing the tune go around and around in my head, Mrs Commerly had said. *It could drive a person crazy . . . Don't eat all that candy before lunch. You'll be sick.*

'Is anything wrong, Hester?'

'Oh – I was just remembering – I mean, Isabel had a headache when I was here Monday.'

'Yes, that was the start of it. She had a headache that afternoon, and she felt worse by bedtime. Yesterday she did not get up at all.' Mrs Abbott smoothed back her hair with a fatigued motion. 'I've just had some tea sent up to her, it seems to be all she can take.'

Before Hester could reply, the silence was broken by a noise from the parlour as Isabel's little brother Charles began to strike the keys of the piano with all his fingers at once.

'Charles – please. I've told you we must be quiet this morning. Your sister is not well.' Mrs Abbott spoke firmly but quietly over her shoulder in the direction of the parlour doorway.

The striking stopped.

Mrs Abbott sighed and turned back to Hester.

'I'll tell Isabel you came by, but I don't think it would be wise to disturb her now, Hester. I'm hoping she will be able to get some rest before Dr Franklin comes. She tossed and turned all night, poor dear.'

As Mrs Abbott spoke, she was opening the door again for Hester to leave.

The noise from the parlour now was Charles making a drumming sound on a tabletop and singing to himself.

'Excuse me,' Mrs Abbott murmured hastily, as the drumming and the singing became louder. 'That boy!'

'Mrs Abbott—'

But Isabel's mother left Hester by the half-opened door and hurried into the parlour, closing the parlour door firmly behind her and drowning the end of a sentence which began 'Charles, I will not speak to you again about—'

Hester hesitated, but the parlour door remained closed. All was silence behind it. All was silence again throughout the house. The silence of a sickroom house. Not even a sound below stairs in the kitchen.

Hester closed the door as quietly as she could, without going outside. She stood a moment more in the blue brightness of the polished hallway, and then she ran across to the stairway and started up. She did not feel safe until she had reached the landing, where the stairs turned, and even then she looked back apprehensively.

What would Mrs Abbott say to discover her halfway upstairs?

But the parlour door remained closed. All was quiet.

Hester caught up her skirt and ran the last half of the stairway. Isabel's room was at the end of the upstairs hall, and she stopped outside the closed door.

'Isabel—' she whispered once, but when there was no reply, she opened the door and stepped in. Below in the hallway she had heard the sound of footsteps coming from the parlour and crossing to the dining room. She listened a moment longer, but it did not sound like anyone was coming upstairs.

Hester turned and faced the darkened room. The curtains were drawn at the windows. A tray had been placed on the table beside the bed, but Isabel lay back upon the pillows, her eyes closed.

'Isabel.'

The eyes opened slowly.

'Hester, is that you?'

Hester went to the bed and took Isabel's hand. It was cold. And so small and fragile. In the dim light Isabel looked as

pale as death, her eyes rimmed with darkish circles of sleeplessness.

'Oh, Isabel, what's wrong?'

'I'm so sick, Hester – the doctor's coming—' Her voice faded away, as if it were too much of an effort to speak.

'You're cold,' Hester said.

She eased the pillows lower so that Isabel could rest more comfortably, and drew the covers up closer around her.

'I'm so tired,' Isabel said faintly. Her eyes closed again, her hand felt limp in Hester's.

'Go to sleep, then.'

'Will you stay with me?'

'Yes, I'll stay.'

Hester stood beside the bed, staring down with dismay. Beautiful, laughing Isabel . . . oh, why didn't the doctor hurry? . . . and there was the gold ring on Isabel's finger . . .

'Isabel?' Hester whispered. But there was no reply, only a soft stirring as Isabel moved her head on the pillow.

And it should have been such a happy day – the house full of chatter and laughing as preparations were made for the trip to the resort town. Charles should have been running in and out of rooms getting in the way, and Mrs Abbott should have been sorting through the things to be taken, saying, 'Here, Isabel, don't forget to pack the handkerchiefs Aunt Cecilia embroidered for you . . .'

Hester looked down at the gold ring again, the gold ring from the shop in Marley Street. It had fit Isabel so perfectly, as though it had been made especially for her. But now it lay almost to the joint of the finger, loosely.

It slid off quite easily as Hester took hold of it. Isabel did not wake up, although she moved her head upon the pillow again and sighed in her sleep.

Hester held the ring a moment. Its gleam in the dull light of the room made her think again of the pallid light across the face of the china figurine the night she had awakened

from her bad dreams. It made her think of pictures of a forest at night, and a hundred steps leading down into darkness.

Crossing to the fireplace, Hester flung the ring into the flames. She saw it there, lying in the fire, and to be sure it would not roll free, she took up a fire iron and poked at the hearth, pushing the ring firmly back amid the burning logs.

And then a moment of doubt assailed her.

Oh, if she was wrong, how exasperated Isabel would be to have lost the ring she admired so much. And what would Aunt Sophie say if she ever heard? 'How unlike you, Hester, to be so foolish,' she would probably scold. 'Letting your imagination run away with you.'

But the ring was past recovering now, and the more pressing problem remained of getting downstairs and out of the house undiscovered. How shocked Mrs Abbott would be to find Hester after she had expressly said she should not go upstairs.

But luck was with her. When she opened the door of the bedroom and peered cautiously into the hallway, there was no one in sight. And no sound was heard from below, where even Charles had at last been successfully silenced.

Hester looked back towards Isabel as she slipped out of the room. Isabel would forgive her for not staying if she knew the circumstances.

And in a few moments more Hester was downstairs, across the shining hall, and out into the cold morning from which she had so recently come.

Six

Dr Franklin found Isabel quite changed when he arrived at the Abbott house a few hours later. He found her so changed, in fact, that she was up and dressed and playing the piano with Charles in the parlour. She would have been packing, but Mrs Abbott had said they should not do anything until the doctor came.

Mrs Abbott could not believe that Isabel had recovered so quickly and completely. The girl's violet-blue eyes were shining, her cheeks were rosy; she laughed merrily as she tried to direct Charles's small fingers to the right piano keys. She had never look healthier.

Still, Mrs Abbott felt, it would be best to ask the doctor if he thought Isabel was up to a trip.

'I can't see why not,' Dr Franklin had declared. He gave Isabel a pat on her rosy cheek, Charles a tug on the ear, and departed – wishing all his patients could recover as rapidly as Isabel had.

By noon Isabel was trying to decide whether she would wear her blue dress, or if the plum-coloured one would serve as well and stand the travelling better.

Meanwhile, Hester fretted at home all afternoon, wondering whether her action of destroying the ring had been right or not. She finally summoned up her courage to return to Isabel's but by that time Aunt Sophie had set her to polishing silver with Betsy in the kitchen, and there was no escaping from that.

'I am sure Dr Franklin will take good care of Isabel,' Aunt Sophie had said unyieldingly. 'You may go in the morning and inquire how she is.'

Betsy, rubbing away at a silver serving spoon, gave Hester a sympathetic smile, fortunately unseen by Aunt Sophie,

who had spotted a place that had been missed on her silver tea tray and had taken after it herself, confirmed in her lifelong opinion that she alone was capable of doing things properly.

As soon as she had breakfasted the next morning, Hester was hurrying to the Abbotts'.

Netta, the housemaid, who answered her knock, found Hester once again red-cheeked and a little breathless upon the threshold. Netta said that Isabel was quite well and that the family had gone to Saratoga after all.

'You mean Isabel got well so fast the doctor said she could go?' Hester was incredulous and joyful.

'Yes, they've gone, early this morning,' Netta repeated with a note of finality.

Like Mrs Abbott the day before, Netta did not like standing at the open door with the cold coming in. She had a freshly brewed cup of tea waiting in the kitchen, and she was looking forward to a holiday for herself now that all the family had gone to Saratoga.

Hester turned away irresolutely and drew her little fur collar up closer around her chin. She was glad that Isabel was well again. It was wonderful news . . . but now the day lay empty before her with Isabel gone.

Lagging, she went down the walk and stood by the gate. She hated to go home. Aunt Sophie was in such a mood. Her legs were stiff again. It meant more bad weather coming, she had said across the silver candlesticks at breakfast. She had also said she was not at all convinced that Hester needed a new dress to wear to Christina's party. And Hester's heart had been set on a new dress.

'I am not made of money,' Aunt Sophie had remarked crisply. She never tired of imparting this information to Hester. 'I've taken you in, Hester, but I cannot afford to raise you like a princess. Perhaps you can wear your blue dress.'

'Oh – no, Aunt Sophie—'

The blue dress was last year's and had never been one of Hester's favourites to begin with. Aunt Sophie had replaced its one good feature, small pearl buttons from throat to waist, with dull bone buttons when one of the pearl buttons was lost.

'I can't wear that old dress—'

But Aunt Sophie only said, 'Please, Hester, not this morning. My legs ache. It's more bad weather coming.'

Hester walked slowly homeward, deep in thought. Whether or not she had been right about the evil spell of the music box and the figurine and the gold ring or it was only a chain of coincidences, Isabel was well. But Isabel was gone.

Hester turned down Auburn Street at last, facing into a northerly wind that had taken the last of the leaves from the trees. Some boys came running past her, rattling sticks against the iron paling of the fences. But otherwise the street was deserted, which only increased her loneliness.

One by one the days passed slowly by. The weather remained cold. As Isabel had said, winter was coming.

Part 2

The Green Bowl

Seven

All was consternation in the parlour on Auburn Street.

Aunt Sophie had broken her favourite bowl, a fragile amber-coloured bowl in which she kept an arrangement of waxed fruit on a polished table by the parlour window. Now she felt the appearance of the parlour was ruined – and she had wanted everything to be so perfect the following afternoon when the Reverend Dr Winslow and his wife came to tea.

Her exasperation was complete, and poor Betsy, summoned from the kitchen to sweep up the pieces, fumbled with the dustpan under Aunt Sophie's irritable directions:

'You've missed that piece by the table leg, and there – there's another in the corner.'

Finally, in desperation, Aunt Sophie decided it was all Betsy's fault and as the girl stood up, flushed from bending and sweeping, Aunt Sophie said, 'I've told you not to set things too close to the edges of tables when you dust.'

'Yes, ma'am,' Betsy murmured nervously. 'But, see – the fruit's all right.'

The wax apples and oranges and grapes had been rescued from among the glass fragments, and they lay forlornly, homeless, upon the table top.

'That's no help,' Aunt Sophie snapped, and Betsy hurried away with her dustpan.

It was a bleak November morning and the gloom pervading the parlour was increased now by the tragedy of the broken bowl. Ah, nothing would go right today, Aunt Sophie was sure of that. The gloom cast itself beyond the present moment into the following afternoon and the absence of the amber bowl when the Winslows came for tea.

*

Unaware as yet of the poor beginning of the day, Hester was in her room upstairs writing a letter to Isabel. It was only a week since Isabel had gone, but it seemed like six to Hester. It was the second time she had written but as yet no letter had come from Isabel, who was likely busy with parties and other activities connected with the wedding.

'I hope you are not looking for a letter from Isabel,' Aunt Sophie had remarked only the day before, when Hester was watching for the postman. 'I doubt that girl can collect two thoughts together at one time to get a letter written.'

Hester wrote:

Dear Isabel,
Aunt Sophie thinks you have fogotten me. Disappoint her and please me by writing soon.

Hester underlined 'soon' with a wavery penline.

Everything is so dreary with you gone. I went to Christina's yesterday, and her cousins were there, but they are all so silly. Christina is the same, nose in the air. But we shall excuse her, shan't we, because she does have lovely parties.
As I said, her cousins were there, toasting their toes by the fire and discussing lots of silly things. Christina is learning to embroider and pays hardly any attention to anything else. I am sure she will give it up, as she did her oil painting and piano lessons. Rupert was there, of course, and asked about you. He is still longing for you, I fear, although you certainly never gave him any encouragement.

Hester paused. Rupert was not her idea of a sweetheart, but she wished that *someone* would love her the way Rupert loved Isabel. But Isabel was so beautiful, of course, every young man must love her. Rupert was certainly faithful, however otherwise uninteresting he might be. Hester was sure it would amuse Isabel to know that he had asked about her, and mumbled and turned red in the face.

Ah, well, Isabel was probably finding new loves at Saratoga . . .

Suddenly this week it has grown quite cold here. The park is very desolate looking.

Hester paused again. She had not been across the park since she had walked home with Isabel that morning from the shop in Marley Street. She had avoided the park . . .

She hesitated. Should she say anything to Isabel about that strange little shop? Should she write in the letter now about Mrs Commerly's music box, and how she had smashed the china shepherdess and thrown Isabel's ring into the fire? No, perhaps it would be better to tell Isabel about it in person when she returned. Somehow it might not sound quite the same in a letter, written out bluntly and in precise sentences. It seemed to defy writing about. And it would probably appear a bit ridiculous and she herself a too hasty victim of impulse. 'Such nonsense,' she could hear Aunt Sophie saying if she should ever hear of it. 'A shop with spells upon the merchandise.'

But it was true that Hester had avoided crossing the park since that day. Sometimes, looking from the parlour window at night to the park opposite where the changing light of dusk and deepening blue twilight marked the passing hours, Hester thought about the shop window with its ink bottles and vases, and the man in the green vest looking out at them and beckoning them in. She could not forget her dream, the dwarflike figure at the foot of the hundred stairs beckoning her down into the darkness that surrounded him.

She returned to the letter, deliberately choosing a subject far from the one that was on her mind.

Aunt Sophie is still not sure I need a new dress for Christina's party, but I hope she will weaken. I won't go if I have to wear that old blue dress! At least, if I go, I won't have any fun.

And no one would ever fall in love with a plain, grey-eyed girl in last year's blue dress trimmed with bone buttons.

Hester laid down her pen with a sigh. She would write more to Isabel later, and run out and post the letter before three. Now she did not feel like writing any more, for every subject that came to mind depressed her.

She decided to go downstairs, and her arrival in the parlour coincided with Aunt Sophie's account of the broken bowl to the Pynn sisters, who had stopped by for a few minutes. Aunt Sophie was restraining herself as the younger Miss Pynn had just been so inept as to mention that the fruit had not been damaged.

'Wax fruit is not as fragile as glass,' Aunt Sophie said as calmly as she could. She could see that the younger Miss Pynn did not fully appreciate the loss Aunt Sophie had suffered.

The elder Miss Pynn took her usual rocking chair and began to creak in it. She suggested that perhaps another bowl could be used.

'I have nothing else that's just right,' Aunt Sophie said. She feared that the elder Miss Pynn was no more acute than the younger.

'Dear me,' the younger murmured with a melancholy air. 'And the fruit is so pretty.'

'Well, Hester, Betsy has broken my amber bowl,' Aunt Sophie said, glancing up as Hester came through the doorway. 'And tomorrow is Dr Winslow's tea.'

'And there's nothing else in the house that will do,' the younger Miss Pynn piped up helpfully.

Aunt Sophie sighed. She stroked a wax apple sadly.

'Maybe you can buy another bowl before tomorrow,' the elder Miss Pynn said. Her nature was along practical lines.

Aunt Sophie frowned to herself thoughtfully.

'I am going out on some errands today, and I shall look.

But I doubt that I can replace it on such short notice.'

'It shouldn't be too hard to find something that will do,' Hester said, less disturbed by the loss of the bowl than by the reminder that tomorrow was the Winslows' tea.

When the Misses Pynn had gone, Aunt Sophie prepared to go out herself. She put on her gloves impatiently. Time to go out into the cold, and already her legs bothered her. It was not a day she expected to find anything right in the shops.

'Good luck,' Hester said.

'Hmph,' was all Aunt Sophie replied; and she set out, bumping the door shut loudly behind her to express her opinion of the course of events the morning had brought.

Hester watched her aunt's departing figure going up Auburn Street, head bent against the wind. She was glad that in Aunt Sophie's present state of ill humour she had not suggested that Hester come along. All Hester would hear would be complaints about the weather and the lack of anything Aunt Sophie needed in the shops. And probably no bowl she saw would suit her.

But Hester's relief in being left out of the shopping expedition was short-lived. Aunt Sophie returned in a very brief time, puffing and bustling in her haste to get back into her warm house, and bearing only a few parcels from the grocer's.

'It's too cold to go tramping about today,' she said to Betsy, unloading her purchases upon the table in the kitchen. Her nose was as red as a plum, her hat slightly askew. Nothing went right today.

Then she plodded up the stairs and across the hallway to the parlour, where it did not soothe her temper or her chill to see Hester curled up in a chair by the fire reading a book.

Hester looked up at the sound of approaching steps and rustling skirts.

'Did you find a bowl?'

'Certainly not,' Aunt Sophie replied. 'It's too cold to go tramping about today.'

Hester knew from past experience there was little anyone could say to please Aunt Sophie when she had made up her mind that everything was wrong.

'If you can part with that book,' Aunt Sophie said tartly, 'I would like you to run across the park to that shop in Marley Street and see if they have anything that might be suitable.'

The effect of her words upon Hester was like a volley of cannonballs fired into the room without warning.

'The shop in Marley Street?'

'There's no need to sound as if I had asked you to walk to Boston,' Aunt Sophie said.

Hester gazed back dumbly.

But Aunt Sophie had drawn closer to the fire and held her hands out before it. She did not notice Hester's surprised face or note that her book had slipped to her lap and closed up, and that the marker had fallen to the floor.

'I meant to stop there myself, but my legs gave out. It's just across the park and a block down; on the corner, I believe.'

She wiggled her fingers at the fire to warm them.

'I don't know if they'll have anything we want, but I went to Mrs Banning's, and there was nothing there. And Tremont's. Nothing. Very discouraging. Marley Street is the only other close place I can think of that might have something.'

'Have you ever been there?' A great curiosity swept over Hester. Had Aunt Sophie ever bought anything there? Was there now, this moment, somewhere in the house something that had come from the shop in Marley Street? A shiver of apprehension went along her back.

But Aunt Sophie's next words relieved her: 'No, I have never been in the place. But I've been by a few times, and I've seen vases and bowls in the window, so there might just be something suitable.'

'But that's the shop where I bought that figurine—' Hester started to say, and then stopped. She had never told Aunt Sophie about her nightmares, and about smashing the figurine and grinding out the eyes with her heel.

She started again: 'That's where Mrs Commerly bought that music box.'

'If Mrs Commerly trades there, it is probably a fairly good shop.' Aunt Sophie sounded satisfied. Her hands were beginning to defrost, and she rubbed them together, enjoying the warmth of the fire.

'But that was the music box that she had to throw into the fire, don't you remember?'

Aunt Sophie's mind was filled with other things: butchers who sent around inferior meat; serving girls like Betsy who burned the gravy at dinnertime; the bareness of her parlour table without the amber bowl – and Dr Winslow's tea the very next afternoon. A brief discussion at Mrs Commerly's a week before had found no place of permanent lodging in her memory.

She turned and frowned at Hester.

'Music box? She threw it into the fire?'

'Don't you remember, Aunt Sophie? She said the tune played over and over in her mind until she had to get rid of the box. It was as if it had an evil spell or something.'

Vaguely Aunt Sophie began to recall some such tale.

'I do seem to recall some such nonsense,' she said disparagingly.

'But it was true, Aunt Sophie. She said it was driving her crazy.'

'That will be the day.' Aunt Sophie rolled her eyes dramatically.

But Hester persisted. 'After she threw it into the fire, the tune stopped playing in her head.'

'Now I've heard everything,' Aunt Sophie declared. 'Spare me today, please, Hester. I am not in the mood to hear fairy stories. Just slip on your coat and run across the park and see if there is anything there that we can put this fruit in. It must be the same size as the amber bowl, if possible, and some colour that will set off the fruit. Fetch me my purse and I'll give you some money, though I hope the shop is not too dear.'

She was still warming her hands by the fire, fretting over the problems that assailed her at every turn, when Hester set off across the park.

Eight

A strong wind had been rising all morning and now swept across Ash Park with a tremendous force. Hester's skirts thrashed. It was necessary for her to hold on to her hat with one hand. But with Aunt Sophie's money secure in the other, she sped along as best she could.

The park benches were empty. Withered leaves scudded across the paths, and the bare trees stretched up into a lowering sky. A solitary bird wheeled and rose over the pond with a loud rush of wings.

Turning into Marley Street, Hester had a queer thought that perhaps the shop would not be there. Perhaps it had come and gone mysteriously, like a haunted shop in a story book. Perhaps she would never find it again. What would Aunt Sophie say then!

But she saw it ahead of her, its window laid out exactly as it had been the day she stopped with Isabel – candlesticks and ink bottles, plates and vases and teapots.

The door stuck for a moment, and Hester thought the shop was closed – but the door gave way suddenly, and the bell tinkled above.

Everything was just as she remembered it: the four steps leading down; the tables set out with wares; the tray of rings Isabel had liked so much; the brass toad in the cage; the jar of candies on the counter.

Don't eat all that candy before lunch, the woman had said. *You'll be sick.*

Mr Mordrian was smoking a pipe and the smoke writhed about him, pale and floating.

Hester closed the door behind her, struggling against a strong gust of wind. She would not let the feeling of uneasiness get the best of her, she thought with

determination. It was a perfectly ordinary errand to buy a bowl. That was all there was to it.

Mr Mordrian rose from the stool where he sat.

'Ah, the pretty young lady returns.' He nodded, as though he had been expecting her.

Hester came down the steps. She felt like a puppet drawn on a string.

'I'm looking for a fruit bowl – my aunt broke hers this morning, and she needs one just a certain size.'

The eyes glinted darkly below the heavy brows.

'Then her misfortune is my gain.'

Hester smiled weakly. She did not like to look directly at the shopkeeper. It made her remember the dream she had had, the hundred stairs . . .

As he came from behind the counter, she looked around the shop nervously. She hoped he would have nothing that was like what she needed.

'Bowls,' he was muttering to himself as he led the way towards the back of the shop. 'We never know what we will need next, isn't that so?'

He had come to a stop by a table where bowls and vases of various sizes were set out.

'Perhaps there is something here that resembles what you are looking for.'

Hester looked at the bowls and vases. There were no amber-coloured bowls, and at first sight there seemed to be nothing just like what Aunt Sophie wanted.

'Perhaps this?'

Mr Mordrian had taken up a bowl of red china painted with white flowers around the sides.

'No, I'm afraid that would be too large,' Hester said.

She felt relieved that there was nothing there that seemed just right.

And yet the memory of Aunt Sophie's anxiety to find a

bowl disturbed her. How disappointed she would be when Hester returned with nothing.

'Perhaps this?'

Mr Mordrian held up a smaller bowl. It was green glass with a fluted edge. It was almost the same shape as the amber bowl had been, although not quite as large.

It would surely serve as well, Hester knew.

Mr Mordrian was watching her. He puffed on his pipe and squinted at her through the smoke. Waiting.

Hester did not know what to do. Should she buy the green bowl? It was the closest thing to the size and shape Aunt Sophie wanted.

I could get rid of it afterwards, Hester thought, if anything seems wrong about it, if anything bad should happen to Aunt Sophie.

It was only glass.

She had smashed the china figurine and ground out the eyes with the heel of her shoe.

The glass of the bowl reflected her own face as she held it closer. Light glinted in the emerald greenness. It was really very pretty.

At last she said, 'Yes, I think this one would do.'

And yet her sense of apprehension remained.

As Mr Mordrian wrapped the bowl for her, Hester's eyes wandered around the shop, and she wondered if there was a bad spell or evil charm waiting in each thing, waiting to be bought and carried home by someone innocent and unsuspecting.

Was there evil in the green bowl?

Mr Mordrian had wrapped the bowl and brought out a ball of twine from under the counter. He noticed that Hester's eyes had moved to the shelf where the brass toad sat in the cage, and he set the twine on the counter beside the tray of rings.

'Would you like to see my little friend?' he asked softly. 'One moment, please.' And before Hester could answer, he walked from the counter to a door at the back of the shop, closing it after him.

Hester only wanted to go. But the parcel was only half wrapped, and she had not paid for it yet.

Mr Mordrian was back almost at once. He turned a small key in the lock of the toad's cage, and lifted the creature out. Hester involuntarily took a step back from the counter as he set the brass toad down before her. She had never seen anything so loathsome, with the lolling tongue and horny skin and webbed back feet.

Mr Mordrian caressed the grotesque brass object fondly.

'Sometimes he likes to come from the cage, don't you, my pet?' He spoke to the toad as though it were alive and could understand the words.

'Would you care to hold him a moment?'

Hester shook her head silently.

'He is only brass,' the shopkeeper wheedled. 'He cannot bite you.'

Hester shook her head again, and the man smiled wickedly. 'Perhaps another time,' he said, and he put the toad back into the cage and locked the barred door.

There isn't going to be another time, Hester thought. I'm never coming back here again.

She shifted from foot to foot restlessly as Mr Mordrian broke off a piece of twine and slowly tied it around the package. She wanted to get out of the shop, to get home to Auburn Street. She wished someone else would come into the shop so she would not be alone there. But no one came.

At last he was finished. He took the money she held out to him and handed her the package.

'Come and see me again. It is always a pleasure to help pretty young ladies find what they need.'

For a moment she looked directly into his eyes, but he had

moved so that his back was to the light and for an instant he did not seem to have eyes at all, only two fathomless black holes below the heavy brows. Hester turned away and walked quickly towards the stairs.

'Come and see me again,' he repeated as she went up the stairs and tugged at the door.

The bell jangled. And then she was safely outside.

She ran until she reached the park. And even there she did not truly feel safe.

At Auburn Street another crisis had arisen. The butcher's boy had left the wrong order of meat. Aunt Sophie's face was mottled with anger.

'Just set it anywhere; I haven't time to look at it now,' she directed, when Hester came into the kitchen with her package from the shop in Marley Street.

'The butcher has sent me the wrong meat – one can trust no one these days—' Aunt Sophie was in a fine stew.

Hester might have thought it was the evil spell of the glass bowl working already, but Aunt Sophie was always having trouble with orders from tradesmen.

Betsy had vanished, having begun to adapt herself to quick disappearances now that she was becoming acquainted with the way things went at Aunt Sophie's house. Hester passed the girl dusting the hall stair rails in a thorough fashion that was sure to keep her at a safe distance from the kitchen for some time to come.

Nine

It was a special occasion whenever the Reverend Dr Winslow and his wife came to Aunt Sophie's for tea. Other guests were usually present, but for Aunt Sophie it was Dr Winslow's day. It was always spoken of as 'Dr Winslow's tea'. Sometimes Mrs Commerly came, mountainlike and triple-chinned, sometimes the Misses Pynn, and quite often a sallow young man who was Mrs Winslow's nephew and (Aunt Sophie hoped) a possible future suitor for Hester's hand. The young man, worse than being of no interest to Hester, actually had an adverse effect upon her. She found him unbearable, dressed in his dandyish clothes, with a simpering expression in his eyes and a habit of making bad puns. Hester and Isabel agreed he was quite impossible, and they doubted that any woman would ever wish to marry him. A yearly income from his late father's estate endeared him to Aunt Sophie.

The afternoon following her purchase of the green bowl, Hester dressed for Dr Winslow's tea in a state of nervous apprehension. In the kitchen that morning she had spotted the green bowl filled with the waxed fruit, waiting to be carried to the parlour table.

What would happen then?

Hester combed her hair carefully, and chose a dress to wear.

In choosing a dress, she did not even consider the blue dress with the bone buttons, although it was Aunt Sophie's favourite and she liked Hester to look her best when the sallow young man came. Instead Hester put on a lavender dress with a white lace collar. It was not new by a long way, but she liked it better than the blue. With the lavender dress

she always wore a small silver brooch that had been her mother's.

Her fingers trembled as she buttoned the dress. Already that morning she had noticed that Aunt Sophie was quite peevish and cross for the day of Dr Winslow's tea. Usually that event put her into a more lenient state of mind with the world. But this morning she had fussed at Betsy as much as ever and complained to Hester that the cake had not risen as high as she had expected.

Perhaps it was the spell of the green bowl already working against Aunt Sophie.

Hester's fingers felt cold, and it took for ever to button up the dress. But at last it was done.

She meant to put only a drop of scent on the underside of the white lace collar, but as she tipped the bottle, it suddenly slipped, and a long wet streak darkened the front of the lavender dress.

Her fingers still cold and trembling, Hester dabbed frantically at the cologne with her handkerchief, trying to dry the streak and disperse its powerful fragrance. Oh – now she smelled like a perfume bottle!

But the streak did not dry quickly. Hester brushed and fanned at it with her handkerchief, craning her neck down to look at the spot until her neck hurt. Pursuing the job with the aid of her mirror, she kept sniffing the handkerchief, which picked up the odour of the cologne and yet did not seem to be removing any from the dress.

Betsy did not help matters by appearing at the open doorway, a stack of fresh linen in her arms and the bright-eyed query: 'What's that I smell?'

Hester could only sigh and brush more feverishly with the handkerchief.

Betsy advanced with the inquisitive friendliness of a puppy dog.

'It'll dry in time, miss.'

'But I don't have any time—'

Betsy examined the spot gravely.

'It's drying some, but it's still there – the stain, I mean.'

Hester could well see that the stain was still there. 'And I smell awful, too,' she moaned.

'Smells good to me.' Betsy's good-natured face floated before Hester.

'But I don't want to smell so *much* – oh, Aunt Sophie will be cross.'

Betsy's expression indicated that she felt this was no great change from normal.

The spot did seem to be drying at last, but the stain remained – a long darkish streak that could not be more than half covered by the silver brooch.

'I'll pin my brooch over the worst part,' Hester said.

'That's a good idea,' Betsy agreed. She thought this was quick thinking on Hester's part, and she watched with interest as Hester opened her bureau drawer.

'Now where can it be? It was right here only yesterday.'

Hester opened another drawer and pushed aside handkerchiefs and underclothes.

'I know I saw it just the other day—'

'Can't you find it, miss?'

Betsy set down the linen and offered to have a peek, but even she could not turn up a silver brooch in any of the drawers.

'How's this one?' she said at last, taking up a round brooch with red stones in the shape of a flower. It was one Aunt Sophie had given to Hester one Christmas, and it was not a good colour for the lavender dress. But Hester was desperate for anything to cover the stain.

'Yes, yes – I guess that will have to do, Betsy. Here, let me pin it on.'

The brooch did not cover much of the stain, but there was

no help for it. Everyone would as surely see the stain as if it had been a mile wide.

'No,' Hester decided, fumbling to undo the brooch again. 'It will only draw everyone's attention to the spot – oh, see what I've done now.'

In her haste she had pulled a thread on the front of the dress, and a small hole appeared.

Betsy shook her head hopelessly. 'Worse goes to worse,' she said sadly.

Hester was close to tears. Her favourite dress, old though it might be, now stained and torn – and her mother's silver brooch lost.

But there was no time for further mishap. In the hall below, the bell sounded the arrival of the Misses Pynn, who always came a little too early, and Betsy flew off to answer.

Hester fanned at the fragrant odour of her dress one last time, and started downstairs with resignation. Worse goes to worse, Betsy had said. And the worst of all, Hester thought – Aunt Sophie's reaction – was yet ahead.

Hester reached the foot of the stairs as the Pynn sisters were being relieved of their cloaks by Betsy. They looked towards the stairway, and Aunt Sophie turned too, frowning with disapproval.

'Why are you wearing that old dress today of all days, Hester? Mauve is a bad colour for you. And what's that on the front?'

'I spilled scent.'

'You smell like a perfume factory,' Aunt Sophie declared flatly. 'Go and change.'

But there was no time now, for another ring of the bell announced the arrival of Dr and Mrs Winslow, usually punctual or even a little behind time, but today, when time was needed, arriving a full quarter of an hour before even Aunt Sophie could appreciate them.

*

Mrs Commerly talked incessantly of her lumbago – putting into the shade all Aunt Sophie's stiffnesses and weather-predicting maladies. The elder Miss Pynn creaked the rocker, which was of small concern to her, as her hearing was not good. The Reverend Dr Winslow, paunchy and heavily whiskered, discoursed on the state of the church. And the sallow young man did not come at all.

The weather was more fair than the week preceding had been. A bright sun had broken through the overcast skies that had persisted for so many days. Sunlight sparkled at the parlour windows and upon the mahogany table that stood before them.

But there was no green bowl of waxed fruit on the table.

Hester's gaze swept the parlour again and again, as Dr Winslow's sonorous voice droned on and Miss Pynn creaked her chair. But the green bowl was nowhere in sight. Twice she caught Aunt Sophie's eyes upon her and read the silent reprimand: *Hester, stop fidgeting.* But her concern only increased.

The bowl was not on the table, where it should have been.

It was not on the mantel.

Nor on the shelf of the bookcase reserved for bric-à-brac.

Halfway through tea, on the precipice of Aunt Sophie's disapproval (for wearing the lavender dress and fidgeting), Hester plunged to the pit by spilling the cream pitcher on to the carpet and the lower edges of Mrs Winslow's skirts.

With everyone's attention focused on the scene of this disaster, Hester lurched forward with her napkin to the rescue of Mrs Winslow's dress – and bumped her elbow against the tea table. A plate of Aunt Sophie's cranberry bread joined the cream pitcher on the carpet.

'No harm is done,' Mrs Winslow insisted bravely, as Betsy was summoned on the run from the kitchen to wipe up the carpet.

'I think we will excuse you now, Hester, while we still

have some of the parlour intact,' Aunt Sophie said and pursed her lips.

Humiliated, Hester rose and left the room. A hot flush of embarrassment covered her face and her hand shook on the stair railing. Nothing had happened to Aunt Sophie, everything had happened to *her* . . . and where *was* the green bowl?

Perhaps still in the kitchen. Perhaps Aunt Sophie had forgotten to take it into the parlour – but that hardly seemed likely, she had set such store by having it there.

Hester turned impulsively and started down the stairs again. She would go to the kitchen and see for herself.

Before she reached the foot of the stairs, Betsy came popping out of the parlour with the cloth she had brought to wipe up the spilled cream. She looked up with surprise to see Hester on the stairs with such a distracted expression on her face.

'Is something wrong, miss?'

It seemed an understatement, considering the events of the afternoon. But Hester leaned forward and motioned to Betsy with a finger to her lips.

Glancing over her shoulder, Betsy swerved from her course and came up a step or two towards Hester.

'Betsy, where did Aunt Sophie put the wax fruit and the green glass bowl I bought?'

Betsy hesitated and looked contritely up at Hester.

'Well – go on – what is it, Betsy? Speak up.'

'I hate to tell you, miss,' Betsy mumbled apologetically. 'But she didn't like it at all.'

'She didn't?'

'No, miss. She put the fruit in it all right, but later she said it was—' Betsy hesitated again.

'Go *on*.' Hester almost forgot to whisper.

'She said it was very unsuitable and a horrid green. I think those were her words, miss.'

'Oh.'

Hester sank back limply against the stair rail.

'I'm sorry, miss. I didn't think it was so bad. And I said so, but she wouldn't listen to me. She said it was ugly, and she couldn't possibly use it.'

All my worry for nothing, Hester thought weakly.

'I'm sorry, miss,' Betsy said again. She glanced back towards the parlour, for she was now growing nervous about standing on the front stairway with the damp, creamy cloth.

'Did she throw the bowl away?'

'Oh, no, miss.' Betsy almost smiled. Aunt Sophie did not throw away anything. 'She took the fruit out and said you could have the bowl in your room if it suited your fancy so much.'

'In *my* room!'

'Yes, miss. I put it there this morning, on the windowsill. It's pretty there with the sunlight shining through—'

But Hester turned and ran up the stairs without waiting for Betsy to finish, and Betsy decided this was just as well and scurried on towards the back stairs and the retreat of the kitchen.

Upstairs, Hester ran to her window. The corner of the curtain had fallen across the glass bowl. She had not even seen it there on the sill. Now as she drew back the curtain further, it lay before her – and it *was* ugly, much darker green than she remembered it being in the shop. Of course Aunt Sophie had not liked it, no one would. Hester sank down on the chair beside the window and stared at the bowl.

It wasn't fair, she thought desperately. Aunt Sophie had sailed through the day like a ship on fair waters – and Hester had ruined her favourite dress, lost her silver brooch, and disgraced herself at tea.

The sun was low now and did not shine through the glass as Betsy had said it had earlier in the day when she placed it there. The bowl stood in the shadow of the window corner,

and it was all Hester could do to force herself to pick it up in her hands. The room had grown extraordinarily cold, and the glass was icy to her touch.

She dropped the bowl on the tile by the fireplace. And the scattered pieces were so dark now as to be almost black. She picked them up to carry them down to the trash bin in the kitchen – and as though, even then, the bowl would not give up its evil charm, one fragment tore her finger and drops of blood fell on the tile.

The gash was jagged and deep, and it did not heal for a long time. And when it had healed, the scar never faded.

Part 3

The Brass Toad

Ten

The days crept on, one much like the next with early winter evenings and the sound of carriages rolling by in the streets.

The weather worsened, and with it Aunt Sophie's temper. Her complaints against Betsy increased, and Hester felt the poor girl would not remain much longer on Auburn Street. She thought she would miss Betsy, who bustled about the kitchen, apron strings flopping loose, dropping pot covers and putting too much salt in things.

Sometimes at night, sitting in the firelit parlour, Hester would look up from her book or sewing, listening to the mantel clock ticking away the moments.

I will keep a diary one day of all my secret loves and lock it up with a golden key I will wear around my neck on a golden chain . . . I will sit on gilt chairs in ballrooms flooded with light, and spread my fan open and wear lace gloves . . .

The mantel clock ticked away the moments into an endless chain.

I will listen to rain falling silver through the night . . . and wake up some morning with blue eyes instead of grey . . .

And then a restlessness would come over her, and she would open her book again or take up her sewing. It seemed like years since Isabel had left.

A note had come from Saratoga reporting that Isabel was having a delightful time. She described the wedding in some detail, with special attention to the bride's dress and the handsome minister who had read the service. But other interests took over at the conclusion of the letter:

Mr Finley's son is staying with him, in the house just down the road from Uncle's. He has been away at school and is now ready to earn his way in life. He is very handsome, Hester, and

comes to see us often. I wish I had brought my green dress after all.

Hester began a reply at once.

Dear Isabel
How I wish I were at Saratoga with you.

Her pen hesitated over the paper. And then she crumpled the paper into a ball, and began again:

Dear Isabel,
Aunt Sophie still says I do not need a new dress for Christina's party. I don't think she ever wants me to have any fun. Even Miss Emory's school must have been better than this. I could wear my old lavender, but it has a spot that won't come out. Betsy has tried everything on it. Mrs Commerly says sponging with milk helps, but it doesn't.

The memory of that awful afternoon flooded back over Hester. Her slowly healing finger throbbed with pain.

Again she crumpled the writing-paper and tossed it into the fire, watching as the flames licked at it until it blackened and fell to ashes.

Hester could not forget the shop in Marley Street. She thought of it often as the days passed. It seemed to be waiting for her, there across the wintry, abandoned park.

No, she thought again and again, remembering the eerie feeling the shop gave her, remembering the sight of Isabel lying so pale on her bed in the room with the curtains drawn closed, remembering the drops of blood falling on the fire tiles. *No*, she would never go into that shop again.

And then one day, quite by chance, returning from a call with Aunt Sophie, Hester found herself again in Marley Street. Aunt Sophie, busy talking about the failure she had so far had in finding the right shade of blue yarn for a shawl

she wanted to knit, turned down Marley Street. Hester, deep in her own thoughts, far from Aunt Sophie's blue yarn, was jerked back to reality as they came suddenly upon the shop window laid out with its display of vases and plates . . . and what was worse, Aunt Sophie's coming to an abrupt halt in front of it.

'I wonder if they might not have something here,' Aunt Sophie said, peering closer into the shop window. 'I wonder if they sell yarn.'

'I don't think so—' Hester said hastily.

Did Mr Mordrian sell yarn? She had no idea.

Nothing stirred Aunt Sophie to action faster than opposition.

'How would you know?' she demanded.

'I've been in here – this is where I bought that green bowl.'

'You weren't looking for yarn, so you wouldn't have noticed,' Aunt Sophie countered. 'It's likely that they do have it.'

She adjusted her gloves and moved towards the shop door.

'Oh – Aunt Sophie – I'm sure you wouldn't find anything you want in there—'

'Come along, Hester. Stop your fussing before we freeze to death out here.'

Aunt Sophie yanked open the door and stepped through into the shop.

Hester could see the pictures of dark landscapes upon the walls and the tray of rings lying on the counter. Nothing had changed. Mr Mordrian was not in sight, but it was as if time stood still here.

Aunt Sophie's heavy tread upon the stairs resounded through the silence, and there was nothing for Hester to do but follow her.

'There doesn't seem to be anyone here,' Aunt Sophie observed.

But then a door at the back of the shop opened, and Mr Mordrian looked out at them. He was drawing on the grey jacket over his green vest, a pipe stem poking from the top of a pocket.

'Welcome to my little shop,' he said in his soft foreign voice. He came towards them and lifted a finger at Hester. 'I know this young lady. But you have not been to see me for a long time.'

'We were not very satisfied with our last purchase,' Aunt Sophie said with a lift of eyebrows.

She peered around the shop with some disappointment. Now that she was in, she could see that it was a dingy place and that the merchandise was not up to her idea of quality. The ugly green bowl should have been a sufficient warning to her not to bring further business here.

'I am sorry to hear that you were not satisfied,' Mr Mordrian said. There was a gleam of curiosity in his eyes. 'What was it that you bought last?'

Aunt Sophie looked at Hester to place the responsibility of a bad purchase upon her.

'It was a bowl,' Hester said lamely.

Mr Mordrian shrugged regretfully.

'It is not always possible to please everyone,' he said.

'I might have brought it back to you,' Aunt Sophie added sharply, 'but unfortunately it was broken.'

'Ah,' Mr Mordrian began to shake his head helplessly.

'Well, that's damage that cannot be mended now,' Aunt Sophie said. She began to look around the shop again. Now that she was in, there was no harm in asking about yarn.

'I was wondering if you have any yarn?'

'Yes, of course. It is over this way.'

Mr Mordrian led Aunt Sophie to a shelf at the end of the counter, and she glanced backward over her shoulder at Hester. *I told you so*, her expression said plainly.

Hester followed meekly. Aunt Sophie was so hard to

please, surely Mr Mordrian in his small shop would not have the particular shade of blue Aunt Sophie wanted, when Tremont's and Mrs Banning's had failed to produce it from their much larger stock.

'This is the finest yarn you can buy,' Mr Mordrian's soft voice said. 'I have many beautiful colours.'

Aunt Sophie began to examine the yarn.

'I was looking for a certain shade of blue. No, I don't see anything here.'

'A pity,' Mr Mordrian said. He began to examine the skeins of yarn himself, shaking his head. 'But perhaps there is some other colour you would like.'

'I've set my mind on blue,' Aunt Sophie replied.

Oh, then let's go, Hester pleaded silently. *Let's go, Aunt Sophie . . .*

'Crimson, perhaps,' Mr Mordrian was saying. 'Or perhaps brown?'

Aunt Sophie's hand lingered over the yarn. The tiny wrinkles deepened around her eyes. She had set her mind on blue. But she was getting discouraged, going from shop to shop and finding nothing. The brown the shopkeeper held out to her was rather a nice shade.

'I see that you like brown,' Mr Mordrian said. 'That is interesting to me. I find it is often very revealing of people, what colours they prefer.'

'I had preferred blue,' Aunt Sophie reminded him.

He smiled. 'Yet the brown is lovely, is it not?'

'Yes,' Aunt Sophie answered slowly. 'It is rather pretty. One doesn't often see this shade of brown.'

'I have many unusual things,' Mr Mordrian agreed softly.

Aunt Sophie's forehead creased in a frown of indecision.

At last, to Hester's surprise, she said, 'Yes, perhaps you are right. The brown might do very well.'

Hester had never known Aunt Sophie to change once she had set her mind on something.

Mr Mordrian went along the counter to the place where he wrapped purchases, and as they followed, Hester whispered to Aunt Sophie:

'Are you sure that's what you want? Maybe Arlington's would have some blue.'

'I've tried there,' Aunt Sophie said crossly.

She felt that the shop was gloomy, and an impatience to be out of it seized her. Even now, getting out the money to pay for the yarn, she was not really sure she wanted brown after all. Her feeling of exasperation was only heightened by Hester's whispering at her shoulder.

At a loss for any other way to vent her feeling, Aunt Sophie remarked crisply: 'I see you do not have much business.'

'On the contrary,' Mr Mordrian replied smoothly. 'I have more than I can handle. This is an exceptionally quiet afternoon.'

'Is that so?' Aunt Sophie sounded sceptical. She did not like to find herself in stores where other people were not. It undermined her confidence in the value of her purchases not to see others also buying. Mrs Banning's shop was always full.

'Yes, indeed,' the shopkeeper continued. 'I am quite busy some afternoons. I have even been thinking of hiring perhaps a nice young woman to help out in the afternoons. Someone like you, my dear,' he added, smiling at Hester.

Hester felt a coldness come over her, as though she stood isolated on some windswept unfamiliar street where there were no lights in the windows of the houses and no sound of any other footsteps but her own . . .

'You don't say,' Aunt Sophie said. There was a speculative note in her voice.

'Yes,' Mr Mordrian continued, 'that is what I have been thinking.'

He was wrapping the yarn now, drawing out a length of

twine to tie the package. But he looked up at Aunt Sophie from under his heavy brows and smiled to himself as if he could tell what she was thinking.

'Someone like Hester here?'

'Someone just like the young lady,' he assured her. His gaze shifted to Hester. 'Perhaps even this very young lady herself. Miss—?'

'Linden,' Aunt Sophie said.

'Yes, someone like Miss Linden.'

Aunt Sophie studied Hester. She saw a grown girl she had taken in, an orphan, and provided for all these years. A grown girl who could well be earning some of her keep after all this time. Or at least earning her own spending money.

'I think Hester would do very well in a shop,' Aunt Sophie said. 'She is a capable, honest girl.'

'I am sure she is.'

Mr Mordrian's voice was so low Hester could hardly make out the words. She tried to look away, but somehow she could not take her eyes from his . . . they changed and darkened and filled her with dread even as she could not look away from them.

'And would Miss Linden be interested?'

Behind the eyes, she looked into darkness . . . at a dwarf at the foot of a hundred stairs.

As though from far off, Hester heard her own voice stammering faintly, 'I don't think so—'

Aunt Sophie frowned.

'What do you mean, you don't think so? You're always complaining about not having enough spending money, wanting new dresses and gloves and heaven knows what. Here is your opportunity to earn an honest penny for yourself.'

Hester looked at Aunt Sophie despairingly, but her gaze wavered under Aunt Sophie's look of rebuke. It was true. She never had enough spending money, never had new

things when she wanted them most (Christina's party). Even now she was still in debt to Isabel for the china figurine.

'Just a few hours in the afternoons,' Mr Mordrian said.

To Aunt Sophie, the man spoke plain sense. Here was a grown girl with no prospect of marriage yet in view and doing nothing whatever to support herself. Here was a shop needing services. The two were meant for each other, and here stood Hester saying she didn't think so.

'Well, Hester, what do you say?' Aunt Sophie wanted to know.

As Mr Mordrian and Aunt Sophie looked at her, Hester was overcome with fear. She felt trapped, cornered. She did not want to be in this shop, with this man, with the ugly brass toad and the mournful pictures on the walls. She wanted to rush up the stairs and run away.

But as they remained looking at her, waiting for an answer, she stood rooted to the spot. There was no place to run away to . . . there were no lights in the houses along the street, and no other sound of footsteps.

She was quite alone.

Eleven

Aunt Sophie's knitting with the brown yarn went all wrong. She was forced to unravel and start again, and even then she miscounted stitches and dropped stitches, and unravelled and started over again. Her eyes must be going bad, she said impatiently. How else could she account for making so many mistakes when she was quite expert at knitting.

And the brown yarn was not really as pretty as she had thought it was when she bought it. It *had* been pretty, in the shop, pretty enough to change her mind from the blue she had planned to buy. But now at home it was no longer so pretty. In fact, she came to hate the sight of it, complained that it made her head ache to knit with such a dreary colour, and in the end she abandoned the whole project of making the shawl.

'I've learned my lesson,' she said to Hester with a firm nod. 'Blue was what I wanted. When I've set my mind on something, I'll not change again.'

The brown yarn was wasted money to her, and she did not ever waste money.

This was scant consolation to Hester. Every afternoon at one o'clock she went across the park to Marley Street. Her attempts to avoid this had been unsuccessful – as futile as pebbles hurled at the rock of Aunt Sophie's made-up mind, failing to scratch the surface of that granite lump.

On her first day, Mr Mordrian was standing at the window, just as he had stood that day when Hester and Isabel had come strolling by on their way homeward from the dressmaker's.

He stood watching for her to come, his hands clasped behind his back, his dark eyes glinting from beneath the

heavy brows. She stood outside and looked in at him a moment.

I am going home, she thought . . . I am going to turn right around and go straight back home again.

But then she felt her hand upon the knob of the door and heard the bell ringing as the door swung open.

He stood below her in the shop.

She came down the stairs slowly, a hand upon the railing.

'Good afternoon, Miss Linden,' he said softly. 'I have been waiting for you.'

He said the words as though he had been sure she would come.

'You may hang your cloak here.'

He pointed to a peg on the wall behind the counter, but Hester stood there without removing her cloak.

'I didn't want to come,' she said, forcing the words out as bravely as she could. 'I didn't want to work here – it's only that my aunt—'

He smiled sadly.

'Don't you like my little shop, Miss Linden? I am disappointed.'

She hesitated. It seemed more than she was able to say. But at last she did say it: 'I think there is something wrong with this shop.'

His brows rose quizzically. He leaned forward slightly, his head to one side, waiting for her to say more.

'There is something – something evil about it, about the things you sell. Your gold ring made my friend sick.'

He did not answer for a moment.

Then he motioned again to the peg and said: 'You may hang your cloak here.'

Hester unclasped her cloak and took it off slowly. She had lost courage to say more. She went behind the counter and hung the cloak on the peg. Tears stood in her eyes, but she

did not want Mr Mordrian to see them, and she tried to blink them back before they could spill over and trickle down her cheeks.

He had turned away from her and was standing once more staring up out of the window to the street.

I will stay this afternoon, and then I will never come again, Hester said to herself. One afternoon could not be so bad. She could get through one afternoon.

'Your friend, the young lady who bought the gold ring, how is she now?'

He spoke without turning to face Hester, remaining still looking up out of the window into the street.

'She is quite well, she is not sick at all now.'

Despite her closeness to crying, there was a note of triumph in Hester's voice.

Mr Mordrian turned from the window then and looked at Hester silently. She could not tell from his expression whether he was surprised to hear this or not.

'But she has not been back to my little shop,' he said. 'Such a pretty young lady. I have been hoping she would return.'

'She's gone away,' Hester said quickly.

Isabel is far away, she thought, safely, safely, far away.

'Is that so?'

Mr Mordrian's eyes narrowed with interest.

'Where has she gone?'

'To visit relatives,' Hester said. Mr Mordrian was watching her so intently she felt frightened. She did not want to talk to him about Isabel. She did not want him to know where Isabel was.

'And will she return soon?'

'No,' Hester answered quickly. 'She won't be back for a long time, months maybe.'

Before Mr Mordrian could say anything more, the bell

jangled over the shop door and a large woman appeared upon the stairway, skirts billowing, filling up the whole width of the stairs as she came down with a jarring step.

Close behind her was another lady, not so stout, carrying several parcels in her arms.

'Do you sell writing paper?' the stout lady asked, and Mr Mordrian nodded and motioned to Hester with a smile.

'Miss Linden will be glad to help you.'

To Hester he said, 'The writing paper is on that table near the back.'

She felt him watching as she walked towards the table, like the china figurine had watched. But she could not smash him upon the hearth. Or tread out his eyes.

'Oh, yes, this is fine, just what I'm looking for,' the stout lady said pleasantly, and her friend peeking over her armful of parcels nodded her head and said, 'It looks like very fine paper, doesn't it?'

Then the ladies wished to look at vases, too. 'As long as we're here,' the lady with the parcels suggested.

While they were examining the vases, Hester noticed that a girl had come in and was standing with Mr Mordrian at the counter. She was trying on rings, just as Isabel had done that afternoon. She held up her hand, turning it this way and that to admire the different rings, just as Isabel had done . . . but when Hester looked again, the girl was gone. Whether she had bought a ring or not, Hester could not tell. She hoped not.

'I'm so pleased to find this shop,' the stout lady was saying to her friend as they moved on from the vases to look at the other tables. 'And prices aren't high, either. We must tell Agnes to try here for the music box she wants, they seem to have quite a large collection of them.'

Poor Agnes, Hester thought.

The bell rang again, and an elderly man came in. 'Brass

trays? Yes, of course,' Mr Mordrian said, smiling and nodding.

Outside a cloud had covered the sun, and the cold bleak winter street stood shrouded in greyness.

When Hester returned home at the end of the first afternoon, Aunt Sophie was in the parlour, beginning her first unravelling of the brown yarn. Her temper, never long at best, was considerably shortened by having to take out what she had just spent so much time knitting.

'Well,' she said crisply, 'did Mr Mordrian manage to keep you busy today?'

Hester sat on the arm of a chair and looked at the ugly pile of brown yarn in Aunt Sophie's lap. She was tired from standing on her feet the whole afternoon and then almost running home across the park. She pushed her hair back wearily.

'I guess so.'

Aunt Sophie made a gesture of impatience.

'I can't think what gets into you, Hester. It is really an excellent opportunity for you.'

'I just don't like the place, Aunt Sophie.'

She felt close to tears again, but Aunt Sophie was never sympathetic to tears.

Aunt Sophie pulled at the yarn crossly.

'It is a perfectly respectable, ordinary shop,' she said. 'And that Mr Mordrey or whatever his name is appears to be a very friendly person. With all the things you seem to feel you must have money for, I should think you would be grateful to have an opportunity like this fall right into your hands.'

I'm not grateful, Hester thought miserably. But there did not seem to be much use talking to Aunt Sophie about it.

*

Hester lay in bed that night listening to the wind. Cold and relentless it swept through the park and along Auburn Street and against her windows, all the night long. She cried herself to sleep at last, longing for Isabel's return.

Twelve

In the days that followed, Hester went to the shop with a growing feeling of helplessness. Every day she determined to tell Mr Mordrian that she would not return again, but the words never came.

Every night she returned to Auburn Street equally determined to tell Aunt Sophie. But night after night she sat silent across the dining-room table, listening to Aunt Sophie's talk, and no words came.

'Mrs Phillips says that donations for the charity bake sale are dreadfully behind this year. She stopped by today, and she is so disappointed. People don't seem to give the time and interest they used to. I told her she could count on me for three cakes. I feel that is sufficiently my share.'

Lamplight flickered across the polished table and the silver candlesticks, and Aunt Sophie's face.

'I fear Betsy has put too much salt in the gravy again. I think I shall hide the salt cellar, if there's anything left in it, which I doubt.'

What would Aunt Sophie say, Hester wondered as she picked at her food, what would Aunt Sophie say if I suddenly said: Aunt Sophie, today a lady came in the shop and Mr Mordrian asked her if she was satisfied with a bowl she had bought last week. She said she liked it very well, but she was afraid it had been a needless purchase. It was a small bowl, and she had bought it for her cat to have its milk in. But the cat died the next day.

What would Aunt Sophie say then?

Nonsense, nonsense, she would say, Hester was sure. She sat silent, and Aunt Sophie went on talking.

'Mrs Commerly's cook has given her notice. Mrs Commerly is very upset. She'll probably end up with

someone the likes of Betsy, and then she will know what a trial servants can be.'

And he has an ugly brass toad he keeps locked in a cage. He talks to it as though it were alive.

What would Aunt Sophie say to that?

But Hester did not even like to think about the toad. She had tried to lift the cage one day when she was dusting the shelf, but it was bolted down. And behind the bars a trick of the shadows made the bloated body of the toad almost seem to move.

Betsy bustled in just then with the desert, and Aunt Sophie's thoughts returned to the three cakes she had offered to make for the bake sale.

'I wonder if I should have offered only two?' she speculated, slicing her fork through warmed-over cake left from tea and softened with a generous covering of thick cream.

And so another day would pass, another evening. And Hester was no better off than before. The next afternoon she would find herself once again in the shop.

Now that he had Hester to help him, Mr Mordrian sometimes went out in the afternoon. He enjoyed walking, he told Hester, and she wondered what thoughts filled his mind as he trudged along hump-shouldered through the streets.

Sometimes he would go into the living quarters he had behind the shop, to fix himself a cup of tea. When the tea was ready, he would come to the door at the back of the shop and say: 'Would you like me to bring you a cup of tea, Miss Linden?'

But Hester always said no.

When he went for a walk, or back to his rooms to brew his tea, she was not sure whether she was glad to be alone or not. She felt that the objects surrounding her, candlesticks,

figurines, bowls, were oppressive thoughts weighing on her mind, and in the corners of the shop there were shadows that seemed to be filled with a foreboding silence, so that the creak of her own shoes across the floor sent eerie shivers up her spine.

And yet when she was alone, she did not have to wait on the customers the same way she did under Mr Mordrian's watchful eye.

She could say, 'If you are looking for bookends, we do not have much at present,' and send the customer off to Mrs Banning's, where the selection would be larger.

She could remain unenthusiastic about the appearance of a ring or brooch, until the customer herself began to doubt if it was what she wanted and left without buying anything.

And she did not have to give the candy to the children.

Standing with their mothers, small cheeks pressed against the counter edge, the children would look hopefully at the jar of candies, but Hester would give no appearance of noticing their wistful looks. She became very adept at smiling blankly at a child whose obvious interest in the candy jar would have seemed impossible to ignore.

Whenever a customer did make a purchase, whether she was alone in the shop or not, Hester's fingers trembled as she counted out change and wrapped the package. What unfortunate thing would occur now? she always wondered. What evil spell lay wrapped so innocently in brown paper and twine? She wanted to say, *Don't buy anything here. Go away – go away.* But she could never speak. She could only watch unhappily after the retreating figures of the customers as they took their packages and went up the stairs to the door, the bell above tinkling as they went out. Looking up through the window, Hester could see the customers disappearing down the street, eager to get home with whatever they had bought.

Soon they would be opening doors to firelit rooms where

tea-kettles hissed and children ran to greet them.

'Come children – come and see the pretty candlesticks Mommy found today in a little shop in Marley Street.'

'This is just the picture frame I've been looking for – and quite a bargain—'

'I shall wear this pretty ring tonight to the party—'

And they would unwrap what they had bought and show everyone, in the firelit rooms where the tea-kettles hissed and the children gathered around.

At five o'clock Hester was allowed to put a large placard saying 'CLOSED' on the shop door and return across Ash Park to Auburn Street. She ran into the gathering gloom of those cold afternoons, and even Aunt Sophie's face across the silver candlesticks at dinner was a welcome relief from the hours at the shop.

Thirteen

One day as she walked along Marley Street on her way to the shop, Hester came suddenly upon Christina Laurence and her cousins standing by the shop window. They were not looking in the window, but stood with their backs to it as though they had only accidentally stopped there to discuss something. Christina, like the sun surrounded by its dutiful planets, stood in the midst of the little group, laughing about something that had just been said. Her eyes were still full of laughter as she caught sight of Hester and said:

'Look who's here, everybody.'

Obediently the planets turned, Rupert looking rather military in a navy coat with shining buttons, Sarah with a frizz of bangs on her forehead that her mother would not have liked, and Giles with his owl face and pale eyes.

'What do you hear from Isabel?' Christina asked, with a glance from lowered lashes at her cousin Rupert.

'Oh—' Hester answered slowly, trying to think what she could pass on of interest from the last skimpy note Isabel had scribbled off, 'she's having a wonderful time. Her mother has bought Charles a parrot.'

'I wouldn't want a parrot,' Giles observed. 'They can peck something fierce.'

'A few good pecks won't do Charles any harm,' Christina said.

Everyone laughed to show how witty they thought Christina was – no one more merrily than Christina herself.

Standing in the thin November sunlight, her reddish hair glinting, Christina looked prettier than usual, Hester thought. Her cheeks glowed pink from cold, and her coat was exactly the right shade of blue to deepen her blue eyes.

'What else does she write?' Sarah did not consider a parrot such great news.

'Going to a lot of silly parties, I suppose,' Rupert suggested, blushing self-consciously.

'Yes,' Hester said. 'Lots of parties.'

'I hope she won't find them too stimulating to enjoy mine when she returns,' Christina fretted with a mock pout.

'I'm sure she won't.'

Sarah began to fidget.

'Are we going to stand here all day? Help us decide, Hester. We thought we might go around to Ramsay's for tea, or should we walk all the way to Highwood and have it at the Green Garden?'

'Momentous decisions of life,' Giles said, blinking his eyes.

'Come with us,' Christina said.

'I can't. I—' Hester hesitated. Would Christina and her cousins laugh to hear that she was working in a shop?

'Come on, Hester,' Sarah urged. She was feeling quite friendly today, in good spirits with everybody and everything. She had slipped out of the house without her mother's seeing her and telling her to change her hair. She had also slipped out with her mother's locket, and she intended to take off her coat at the tea shop so everyone could see how becoming it looked on her.

'I can't,' Hester said again. 'I have to go in here.'

The others turned slowly and for the first time became aware of the shop in front of which they had paused to take their vote between Ramsay's and the Green Garden.

'What a nice little shop,' Sarah said. 'Look at the china cat there in the corner of the window, Christina. Isn't it dear?'

Christina allowed a queenly gaze to rest upon the cat in the corner.

'Very dear,' she said, mimicking Sarah. Then, 'We'll wait for you, Hester.'

'Let's all go in,' Sarah suggested. 'We can look around while Hester gets what she wants.'

'I don't think you'd want to wait for me,' Hester said. She smiled faintly and prepared for the worst. 'I'll be here until five o'clock.'

'What on earth for?' Giles asked in some surprise. The shop did not appear to him worthy enough for an investment of three minutes, and here was Hester about to devote her afternoon to it.

'I – work here in the afternoons.'

'You work here?' Christina was too taken aback to fashion her words as elegantly as she usually liked to.

'Doing what?' Giles felt a flicker of interest in the shop after all.

'I sell things, of course,' Hester said, a bit more sharply than she meant to. Oh, what fun it would be to go with them to Ramsay's for tea – or even all the way to Highwood and the Green Garden.

'Really, Hester?' Sarah looked somewhat impressed.

'Really.'

'My goodness,' Christina murmured. She was trying to decide whether her reaction should be amused or perhaps a trifle haughty.

'Yes, and I'm late now. I'd better get in.'

Sarah turned and squinted into the shop.

'Do you work for a crabby old lady like that Mrs Banning? Wait – I see a man in there. Is he the shop owner, Hester?'

'Yes. His name is Mr Mordrian.'

Christina adjusted a glove and flicked an imaginary speck from her coat sleeve. She was getting impatient for tea. Sarah was right, they couldn't stand there all day.

'Let's go in,' Sarah said impulsively. 'Let's go in a minute and look around.'

Christina did not see anything in the shop window of much interest to her, so she said, 'Sarah, I thought you were in such a fuss to get on.'

'A few minutes won't matter,' Sarah replied. But she didn't say this very hopefully. She could see that Christina did not care to go into the shop, and that would be that.

Nor did Rupert and Giles come to her aid, being generally disinterested in little shops, which they felt to be frequented mostly by fat ladies looking for teapots and umbrellas.

Rupert had forgotten his gloves, and his hands were cold. He was inclined to agree with Christina that it was time to move on.

'Save your money, goose,' Giles said to Sarah consolingly.

To Hester's relief they set off, turning to wave back at her as she opened the shop door to go in.

There was a time when she could have gone right along with them. Had a nice tea at Ramsay's or the Green Garden. Sat and admired the hats of the ladies going by the tea room, listened to the pleasant click of teacups and the low murmur of voices rising and falling under the dangling prisms of crystal chandeliers turning and catching glowing rays of light.

'Good afternoon,' Mr Mordrian said. He stood in the shop below, looking up at Hester. 'Your friends did not wish to come in?'

'No. They were in a hurry.'

'Perhaps another time.'

'Yes – perhaps.'

Hester felt forlorn and cheated. She should be on her way to tea, not imprisoned in this horrid place. She hung up her cloak dejectedly.

Mr Mordrian watched her a moment, puffing on his pipe and smiling to himself. Then he said, 'I think I will make

some tea, Miss Linden. Would you care for some tea?'

Hester shook her head, and when he had gone to his rooms behind the shop, she stood in frustrated silence. She wanted tea – but not here, not with Mr Mordrian. She wanted to be out with Christina and her cousins. Probably by now they were sitting down at one of the tables at Ramsay's . . . Christina drawing off her gloves and tossing her red hair. 'Imagine, Hester working in a shop,' she was probably saying . . . and Sarah would be trying to decide whether to order a tart with her tea or a slice of Ramsay's famous raisin cake.

Hester stared at the brass toad with its bulging eyes and open mouth. All her hatred and fear of the shop seemed to be centred in that repulsive figure. She longed to tear the cage from its bolts and, if only it were glass, smash the toad to bits on the floor as she had smashed the china shepherdess and the green bowl.

I will keep a diary one day . . . Hester began. But it wouldn't work.

I will be a toad . . . and live in places covered with slime and watch the dark movements of fish going by under the water into the seaweed . . . and sleep in dark caves where water drips somewhere in the black silence around me . . .

Tears trembled in her eyes.

I will keep a diary one day, and have tea at Ramsay's under the crystal chandeliers . . . and eat insects on my long, slimy tongue in shadowy places where no one ever comes . . .

Fourteen

As the afternoon passed, Hester worried that perhaps Christina and her cousins might some day come into the shop after all, to see what it was like. It would be just like Christina to say to Sarah, 'Let's drop in at that funny little place where Hester works and see what she's doing.' They might even decide to come back along Marley Street after tea today!

Every time the shop bell rang, Hester looked up uneasily – and when at last a well-known face appeared, it was the last person she expected to see.

'Hester!'

As pretty as ever, her blonde curls peeking from under a new bonnet, Isabel stood smiling at the top of the stairs.

When Hester could only stare in surprise, Isabel laughed and came down the stairs with a swish of skirts. She brought a rush of cold air from the street, and the gloomy shop seemed suddenly brighter as Isabel came laughing and swishing her skirts.

'I went to your house and your aunt said you were working here. I couldn't believe my ears.'

As Hester only continued to stare with surprise, Isabel laughed again.

'I've surprised you,' she said, clasping her hands together like a child. 'We weren't to come home until next week, but all of a sudden Mama decided she wanted to get back – so here we are. I just *knew* you'd be surprised.'

'I certainly am—' A thousand thoughts crowded Hester's mind at once. Everything would be different now that Isabel was back.

'How did this all come about, Hester?' Isabel wanted to

know everything at once. 'Oh, Hester, tell me everything.'

Hester suddenly felt very tired. It seemed as effort even to speak. Isabel was so bubbling and happy and excited. There was no matching her mood, and Hester felt forlorn and tired. To tell Isabel all that had happened since she left for Saratoga – why, where would Hester even begin?

'Aunt Sophie and I happened to come in one day and Mr Mordrian said he needed someone to help out in the afternoons. That's all.'

Oh, but there was so much more . . .

'But a job, Hester, a real job. It's so exciting.' Isabel's eyes were sparkling. 'I wish I had one.'

'You wish you had a job? Why would you want—'

'It would be something different,' Isabel rushed on eagerly. 'I'd like to sell hats at Madame Rouleau's, maybe – or work at the sweet shop. Ah, that would be the most fun.'

Hester smiled in spite of herself. She had a vision of Isabel at the sweet shop, popping chocolate creams into her mouth and wiping her fingers on a white-ruffled apron.

'I'd forgotten what a quaint little shop this was,' Isabel said next. She glanced around as if considering whether there was anything she wanted to buy.

Hester could not think of anything to say. It was impossible to remember that only a few weeks ago she had run to Isabel's house to tell her about the gold ring and the figurine she had broken, and about Mrs Commerly's music box. Now here was Isabel, and Hester could not say any of these things. They all seemed to have happened so long ago . . . She wondered if Isabel had missed the gold ring. Possibly she had forgotten all about it in her haste to pack for the trip; or perhaps she thought she had misplaced it somewhere and would come across it by and by.

And yet Hester felt she must somehow say something, for here was Isabel again examining the rings laid in the tray on

the counter. She tried one with a red stone first, and then put on one with a large green stone and held it against her dress to see how well the colour matched.

'Oh – Isabel—'

But before Hester could say more, a voice from the rear of the shop said:

'Are you thinking of buying a ring?'

Mr Mordrian came towards them, carrying his cup of tea.

Oh, don't buy a ring, Isabel, a voice inside Hester cried silently. *Don't buy anything here. Go away and never come back!*

Isabel turned and smiled at Mr Mordrian. The ring with the green stone sparkled on her finger.

'Very becoming,' Mr Mordrian said. He came along behind the counter to where Hester stood.

But Isabel sighed and shook her head.

'I've spent every penny of my allowance this month. I'll have to come back another time.'

She slipped off the ring and put it back on the tray.

'Such a pity,' Mr Mordrian said softly.

Isabel sighed again and forced her attention reluctantly from the ring tray.

'Hester, I must run now. I told Mama I'd only be at your house a few minutes, and it's been so much longer since I had to come all the way here.'

Hester did not know how to feel, now that Isabel was rushing away so fast. Surely she wanted her to go – and yet she wanted her to stay.

'Good-bye, Hester,' Isabel called back from the top of the stairs. She blew a kiss to Hester. 'I'll see you soon. Mama has a hundred things for me to do, unpacking and so on. I must rush.'

Then she was gone.

The bell jangled and grew quiet.

Mr Mordrian lined up the rings again. Isabel had set them

back without noticing their original places on the tray. He liked to keep things orderly.

Hester felt desolate. All the brightness and gaiety Isabel had brought into the shop had gone with her, with the kiss blown back and the tinkle of the bell and the rush of cold air before the door closed.

'Such a nice young lady,' Mr Mordrian said. His manner was quiet and thoughtful. 'A pity she had no money.'

The rings were arranged in order again, and he picked one from the tray and examined it absently in the light.

'You do not like my little shop, Miss Linden.'

Hester did not reply.

I hate this shop and you know it!

Mr Mordrian looked up at her and smiled at her silence. The ring he held flashed for an instant as it caught the light.

'Well, Miss Linden, we shall not be here much longer.' He replaced the ring and looked about the shop speculatively. 'My little shop has served its purpose. Soon we will be moving on, you and I.'

Hester gazed at him with bewilderment, and he seemed privately amused at her confusion.

'Yes, Miss Linden, you will come with me.'

'I would never go anywhere with you—' Hester was incredulous, but he raised his hand to stop what she was saying. 'Yes, you will come, Miss Linden. When it is time, you will come. I will need an assistant in my new shop. And who would suspect a kindly old man with such a young innocent salesgirl. Eh?'

Hester stared in horror and amazement at his words.

'And perhaps your pretty friend. Do you think she will come with us?'

'*Isabel*?' Hester could not believe what she was hearing.

'Imagine what a large and expensive shop we will have. Think of the interesting purchases of our customers.' He smiled secretively. 'It is quite exciting to control events,

Miss Linden. Quite interesting. Quite – how shall I say it? – satisfying. Yes, quite satisfying.'

He paused a moment and his voice took on a confiding tone of menace.

'In my village, long ago, the other boys laughed at me because I was small and hunch-shouldered and clumsy at schoolwork. They would not laugh now, Miss Linden. No one would laugh.'

His eyes burned darkly, and his voice was so low Hester could barely distinguish the words.

She would never go anywhere with him. Never.

Fifteen

It was impossible for Hester to fall asleep that night. She tossed and turned and stared into the darkness.

She would never go anywhere with Mr Mordrian. Never.

But she hadn't wanted to work in his shop . . . and somehow that had come about.

But going *away* with him was different, wasn't it? Aunt Sophie wouldn't let her go.

Hester's thoughts raced.

What if Mr Mordrian made it all sound right, like a good opportunity for Hester?

I don't want to go, Aunt Sophie . . . Nonsense, Hester. Here you are a grown girl with no prospects of marriage, and here is a splendid opportunity for you to be well employed.

Oh, it couldn't be that way, it couldn't.

And yet she had felt half hypnotized by his burning eyes and the sound of his soft voice.

And what did he mean when he said the shop had served its purpose?

Hester turned her head fitfully on the pillow, trying to sleep, but it was little use. New worries came to mind. Isabel was back. She must warn her not ever to buy anything in the shop. Let Mr Mordrian go where he would, but in the meantime she must warn Isabel to stay out of the shop. She must tell her about the bad things that happened when people bought something there.

But what if Isabel said she was only imagining things? What if Isabel tossed her head and laughed at hearing such a wild tale. And there was not really anything Hester could prove. The ring, the shepherdess figurine, Mrs Commerly's music box, the green bowl – they were gone. A tangled pile of brown yarn that Aunt Sophie had abandoned did not

seem much proof for all the evil Hester wanted to tell about.

She kept dozing and waking again as the night passed, and finally, quite early, she gave up trying to sleep at all and lay watching the light that came gradually into her window. So faint at first, and then more strongly, like the idea that was growing in Hester's mind.

If she could go into the rooms behind the shop, the rooms where Mr Mordrian lived, perhaps she could discover something.

Hester cringed inwardly, and drew the blankets closer about her, for the thought made her shiver. What could be there? And what if Mr Mordrian caught her poking and prying among his things? What if the door closed upon her there, and she could never get out again? No evil seemed too great to imagine at Mr Mordrian's shop.

The next afternoon seemed to be endless, as Hester waited to see if Mr Mordrian would go out. Sometimes he did not leave the shop at all while she was there. The thought that he might not go out filled her with relief. If he did not go out, she could not go into the rooms. She would have to wait until another day.

And yet the thought of waiting, of putting off something she now felt she must do, seemed as unbearable as the doing.

And then, just after three, Mr Mordrian came from the rooms at the back of the shop wearing his coat.

'I think you can manage awhile,' he said to Hester.

He went up the steps, and the bell tinkled as he opened the door.

When he was gone, the shop was silent. Hester stood behind the counter, alone in the shop.

No customer came. There was no sound but the ticking of the clock.

If she hesitated too long, a customer might come, and she would have no time to discover anything.

Her footsteps echoed on the bare wooden floor as she went along the aisles of the shop towards the door at the rear. As she put her hand on the knob it occurred to her for the first time that the door might be locked. But it opened easily at the turn of the knob, as soundlessly as a door opening in a dream.

The room beyond was dusky and still. The fire had almost gone out behind the grate. Through a half-open door at the side Hester could see a small sitting room, beyond which she knew the other rooms of Mr Mordrian's living quarters would lie. But the room she stood in now appeared to be a workroom and storage room. On shelves along the wall stood the vases and figurines and music boxes that would eventually go into the shop. There was a large table in the centre where some boxes of new merchandise had been set. Painted china plates stood in a stack by one opened box. New things that had come for the shop . . . from where?

Hester's heart began to beat faster. Here was the clue, the proof she was looking for. Surely Mr Mordrian's merchandise did not come from an ordinary place.

But the shipping label on the box of painted plates was a Liverpool address, and another box was from a town in Germany, and another from France, the glass manufacturer Pierre Roualt. Hester read the label with disappointment. She had seen Pierre Roualt on items at Mrs Banning's shop. It was a name well known to her, although Aunt Sophie did not consider it superior glassware. No doubt the Liverpool and German addresses were those of equally known and respectable firms.

The atmosphere in the room was oppressive, and there was an ominous look to the shelves of wares glimmering in the fading firelight. The eyes of the figurines watching as the china shepherdess had done that dreadful morning . . . the music boxes waiting for the touch of a hand to begin the tunes that would never stop . . .

At the opposite end of the table from the boxes there were some books that appeared to be very old, grown shabby with much use, and Hester began to look at them, lifting each worn and ancient volume with growing wonder.

The books were filled with writing in a language she could not read. There were strange signs and symbols and things she did not recognize at all, though sometimes in the brittle yellow pages she caught sight of a bird with spread wings and taloned feet, a horse with head thrown back and front hooves raised to strike . . . crude and terrifying pictures of birds and beasts.

Hester had left the door to the shop ajar, so that she could hear if a customer came in; and she put each book back upon the table exactly as she had found it. Mr Mordrian was so orderly, he would notice if anything had been moved.

To her horror one page came loose from the dried binding of a book and lay like a living thing in her hand. Oh, what if Mr Mordrian should notice *this.*

She pressed the loose page back into the book as well as she could, so that no telltale sign showed, no corner stuck out into sight at the edge of the moulding covers. And after that she did not dare pick up another book.

But it didn't matter. She could learn nothing from them. Oh, what am I doing here? she thought with dismay, and a sense of urgency to be out of the room swept over her. She swung suddenly to face the door to the living quarters beyond, expecting Mr Mordrian to appear there, smiling in his evil way. But the doorway was empty. The room beyond was only a deserted parlour. The creak of a floorboard under her own feet had startled her.

Anxiety to get out of the room mingled with disappointment as Hester looked back at the table, the boxes of merchandise, the books that made no sense. She had tried. She had been so brave. And she had found out nothing.

She was turning away from the table when she caught sight of a drawer handle, glittering in the faint light of the dying fire.

The drawer stuck at first, and then it lurched open abruptly with a rasping sound of wood against wood.

There was a small flat book inside, and Hester lifted it out carefully. Underneath the book lay a key, but there was nothing else in the drawer.

Hester opened the book and turned the pages furtively. It seemed to be a journal of some kind, with page after page covered in a spidery writing too fine to read in the poor light. Signs and symbols had been copied from the books upon the table, and the threatening birds and animals drawn with a precise hand.

Did she have any more time before Mr Mordrian returned? Hester glanced apprehensively towards the shop. There was no way of telling when he would come.

She carried the journal closer to the fire, and bent close to the small flicker of light. The page before her was a list of dates and names: 1413 Rastinelli; 1451 Volmer; 1507 Anton LeBruk... The names and dates meant nothing, and she quickly turned to another page. And here words that did mean something leaped out at her in the firelight:

'I too have discovered the power. My experiments have just begun. One must begin where one is. I begin here – but soon I will move on.'

The bell on the shop door seemed to ring in the pit of Hester's stomach.

Whirling, she shoved the journal back into the drawer and struggled to close it, to leave it as she had found it. Her heart pounded as the drawer stuck again. She was caught. Mr Mordrian would be upon her in a moment.

The drawer gave way under her frantic pushing, closed at last, and Hester flew to the doorway.

At the foot of the shop steps a short, elderly lady looked

across the tables and aisles and greeted Hester with a smile.

'There you are, dearie.'

It was only a customer.

The rest of the afternoon passed with a quality of unreality for Hester. She went about her duties mechanically, the memory of the room, the writing and drawings in the journal always in her thoughts. Customers came and went. Mr Mordrian returned and sat behind the counter smoking his pipe. When Hester put the 'CLOSED' sign on the door, a half-hour earlier because it was Saturday, Mr Mordrian said, 'I shall see you Monday, Miss Linden,' and then he went into the room behind the door that opened as soundlessly as a door in a dream.

Hester had no clear idea of what she would do now, and the fastenings on her cloak were too much to struggle with. Clutching the cloak together with her hands, she was hurrying along the darkening street towards the park when not far ahead she saw a policeman coming towards her, strolling on his rounds.

Hester began to walk faster. Of course! She would speak to the policeman. She would tell him. He would know what to do. And then a voice beside her said, 'We seem to be going the same way this evening, Miss Linden.' Mr Mordrian had fallen into step beside her.

The policeman was directly before them now.

And then he was past. Gone on along the street the way they had just come.

'Do you always walk so quickly?' Mr Mordrian inquired with a mocking smile.

'I'm – late—' Hester stammered, too frightened to think of anything else. Mr Mordrian knew she had been about to speak to the policeman. Perhaps he had noticed something disturbed in his room, and come after her. Somehow he had

known, would always know, Hester was certain. She would never really be safe from him again.

At the end of Marley Street, by the park entrance, Mr Mordrian said, 'I must leave you here.' And as Hester started through the park, he turned and went in another direction. Several times she thought she heard footsteps behind her, but the park walk was always empty when she looked back, and she arrived at the other end of the park cold and exhausted. Never had home and supper, Aunt Sophie and bumbling Betsy, seemed so dear to her. Auburn Street lay to the left, and she wanted to go there, to go home. But she could not go home yet.

She forced herself to turn down Finch Street, towards Isabel's house.

Sixteen

'And to think, I just thought I had misplaced the ring when I was packing to go to Saratoga.' Isabel spoke with hushed awe as she gazed at Hester.

Isabel well remembered how sick she had been. She remembered the ache in her head and the weakness, first the fever and then chills when she could not get warm. 'The doctor is coming,' her mother had said soothingly, and Netta the maid had brought tea Isabel was too sick to drink.

Isabel remembered how very suddenly she had felt better, and how surprised and happy everyone was that she had recovered so quickly.

Hester had destroyed the gold ring.

'So you believe me, Isabel?' Hester leaned forward anxiously.

'I believe you, Hester. I do, I do.'

Hester felt a still-present burden grow lighter now that she had told Isabel and Isabel had not scoffed or argued. Isabel believed her.

The girls were sitting on the hearth-rug before the fire in Isabel's room. They had been talking a long time. Hester had told Isabel everything, from the story of Mrs Commerly's music box to the discovery of Mr Mordrian's journal and the books from which he had learned the power of evil.

Outside the dusk had deepened to the full dark of night. Occasionally they had heard sounds from the rooms below as one or another of the servants went about her duties. But they had not been interrupted. Mr and Mrs Abbott were out to dinner at the home of friends, and even little Charles had not come knocking at the door to play or chatter to them.

'He is going to open another, larger shop,' Hester had saved this one last thing to tell. 'This shop in Marley Street was just a beginning for him – a place to experiment with his powers. He wants me to go with him. He said no one would suspect an old man with a young, innocent salesgirl.'

'No one would suspect . . .' Isabel echoed the words as she gazed at Hester's gentle face. Yes, Mr Mordrian was cunning. There was no one in the world less likely to arouse suspicion of evil than Hester Linden.

'And he even said something about you.'

'About me?' Isabel stiffened.

'He said maybe you would come too.'

Isabel was dumbfounded.

'*Me!* Oh – this is preposterous!' She sprang to her feet and paced restlessly before the fire. 'Preposterous!'

'I'm so afraid of him.' Hester's voice wavered, and Isabel knelt on the hearth rug again and put her arms around Hester.

'Don't worry. He can't make us go anywhere,' she said staunchly.

'But what shall we do *now*?' Hester looked at Isabel helplessly. 'If I did talk to a policeman, somewhere, somehow, I think Mr Mordrian would know. Somehow he would know.'

The girls were silent a moment, thinking of what evils might then follow.

'And he would fool them anyway,' Isabel said at last. 'He would fool them. He would seem to be just a kindly old shopkeeper – and we would be just two silly girls.'

'Yes, I think he could fool them,' Hester agreed. 'He would somehow hide everything – perhaps he has already begun. And if they went into that room, they wouldn't find anything wrong at all. And then afterwards' – Hester's voice sank to a whisper – 'afterwards, what would he do to us?'

'Let me think a minute,' Isabel said. A log shifted and fell

with a soft sputter. A door closed somewhere below.

'That toad, you said he spoke about it in such a special way. I think the toad has something to do with his evil powers.'

'So do I.' Hester could not help but shiver to think of how Mr Mordrian had spoken of it, spoken *to* it. How he had caressed the loathsome form.

'If we could get that, take it and destroy it . . .' Isabel let the rest of the sentence finish itself, unspoken but understood between them.

'There was a drawing of a toad. I remember now. There were horrid drawings of birds and animals in the book, and I remember there was a toad.'

Isabel nodded. 'That's got something to do with it, Hester. I just know it. He said it wasn't for sale. Then why is it even in the shop? Why doesn't he keep it back in his rooms? It's because he needs its powers right there in the shop.'

'But how can we get it?' Hester felt a sense of dread to think of picking up the toad, carrying it off somewhere to destroy it, even if she could get it. 'It's locked in the cage, and the cage is fastened to the shelf.'

'There must be a key—' Isabel stopped. 'What is it, Hester?'

'There *was* a key! Under the journal. I saw it when I lifted up the journal. I just didn't think much of a key. It was the book I wanted to see.'

'Maybe it was the key to the cage. Do you think so, Hester? You saw the key when he opened the cage for you.'

Hester shook her head. 'I didn't pay any attention to the key. I was just watching him and looking at that ugly toad. I didn't want him to take it out and show it to me. I wasn't thinking about anything else.'

'It *must* be the key,' Isabel decided emphatically. 'If you can get back into the room and get the key – I'll help.'

Hester was grateful for Isabel's loyalty and willingness,

but although they talked and planned, there did not seem to be any exact way that Isabel could help. Hester couldn't go into the room unless Mr Mordrian left the shop for some reason. And that might be any day – or no day for a while. Isabel could not spend whole afternoons at the shop for no apparent reason, waiting to help Hester get the key and see if it opened the cage.

It was something that Hester was going to have to do alone.

'What shall I do with it, if I ever get it?' Hester felt anxious and uncertain.

'Throw it to the very bottom of the pond in the park.' Isabel bent her head close to Hester's, her eyes bright with excitement. 'When spring comes, it will sink in the mud and be gone forever.'

Hester stared at Isabel with admiration. The pond in the park was not far from the shop. Surely she could get that far, Hester thought. Surely she could safely get that far.

Seventeen

The Pynn sisters sat in Aunt Sophie's parlour, waiting for tea to be ready. It was only mid-afternoon, but lamps were already lighted. The elder Miss Pynn said it was going to snow soon.

It was Sunday afternoon, and time stood still.

And then at last they heard the clinking of china on the tea tray as Betsy came from the kitchen.

'About time,' Aunt Sophie remarked. Her back had begun to ache, and she set aside her sewing with relief. A good cup of tea was just what she needed . . . what an untidy girl that Betsy was, apron strings trailing again, the wrong spoon in the sugar bowl.

'Hester, pour the tea. My back is bothering me today.'

Obediently Hester poured, handing the teacups to the Misses Pynn, who took them with their thin, veined hands.

'It will snow before morning,' the elder Miss Pynn said. Her sister had spotted currant cake on the tea tray. It was sliced thin, and she took two pieces greedily. She thought she would take two more by and by, if everyone else didn't eat them up first.

Betsy vanished into the kitchen, and they could hear the sound of cupboards opening and closing, and then even the kitchen was silent.

Hester drank her tea.

Sunday afternoons were long in winter.

But this one would not be long enough. It would end. Then it would be Monday. Then she would have to go to Mr Mordrian's shop.

And it did not snow before morning.

Monday morning dawned bare and bleak, and at one o'clock Hester made her way across Ash Park. Under the low cloud-filled sky the surface of the pond lay cast in dark reflections of impending storm. Even the shop in Marley Street was penetrated by the gloomy day, and Hester felt that the tables were crowding closer and closer around her in the dismal light. Nervously she rearranged the shop window, dusted the shelves. She wished Isabel would come in, even for a moment, but no one she knew came at all.

And Mr Mordrian did not go out.

The snow began late in the afternoon. Mr Mordrian was in his rooms behind the shop, and Hester stood by the window and watched the snow. It was the first snowfall of the year, and the flakes came down slowly at first, large and feathery, falling softly against the windowpanes of the shops along the street.

How beautiful it was, Hester thought, the falling snow in the early twilight.

The flakes began to come faster and heavier. It was a real snowfall, the kind that would cover the streets and the rooftops and the fence posts. And the bare-branched trees in the park. And carriages and doorsteps and the dried brown gardens behind houses.

Passersby bent their heads as they hurried along. Wheels of phaetons and carriages left trails upon the paving stones, and the manes of the horses were white with flakes.

All the air was white with snow. The street lamps were lighted now, as Hester watched, and the scene beyond the window grew more beautiful than before. Gazing out, she forgot where she was, and how worried and unhappy she had felt for so many, many days.

It was like looking into an enchanted world, to see the whirling snow in the lamplight of the dusky street.

The sound of the bell brought Hester back to reality, and she turned from the window with regret.

A woman and a small boy had come in, their shoulders white with snowflakes.

'Such a lot of snow – gracious, I'm covered.' The woman laughed as she shook her skirts. Spatters of melting snow flew off in every direction.

'I've come for some writing paper.'

'Yes – it's over here.' Hester came from behind the counter and led the way to a table at the side of the shop.

And then, just as on the occasion before, when she had almost given up hope, Mr Mordrian came from his rooms wearing his coat.

He made a bowing motion with his head when he saw the customer, and his eyes glinted with delight to see the child. 'Miss Linden will take good care of you,' he said to the woman, and then, to Hester, 'I will be back soon.'

He took a step or two, and then turned back.

'Don't forget our treats for the little boy,' he said softly. And lifting a finger, he chided gently, 'You do forget sometimes, Miss Linden.'

'I'll remember,' Hester murmured. The little boy was listening with interest, and Mr Mordrian paused again.

'Just to be sure,' he said slyly, and reached into the jar himself to take out some candies for the child.

'Say thank you,' the mother prompted, and the boy mumbled shyly.

Mr Mordrian patted the small head. 'Come and see me again,' he invited the boy, and then at last he continued up the steps and out of the shop.

Hester thought the woman would never go. She found the writing paper she needed, but she was inclined to browse and look about a bit before she finally left.

When the customer had gone, Hester looked at the clock. Mr Mordrian had said he would be back soon, and her heart pounded furiously as she hurried to the door at the back of the shop.

The journal lay in the drawer, and beneath it lay the key. Hester lifted the key and clasped it in her palm. The firelight flickered, and the eyes of the figurines on the shelves stared at her. The ancient books were somewhat disarranged, as if someone had been reading them again.

Hester hesitated, her hand on the journal in the drawer. Was there something more she could discover? But she only wanted to get the brass toad and run from the shop for ever, and the drawer rasped as she slammed it shut.

She was back in the shop at once, only a few steps more to the metal cage, when she heard the shop door open. Mr Mordrian stood looking down at her. Her heart lurched, and the sharp edge of the key dug into her palm as she closed her fingers tighter to hide it.

Mr Mordrian came down the steps and regarded her suspiciously.

'Is something wrong, Miss Linden?'

'No – no—' Hester felt panic-stricken and helpless. What if he should seize her hand and force her fingers open?

'You look very pale.'

Mr Mordrian stood close before her. In a moment Hester thought he would hear the pounding of her heart.

'Are you not well?'

'Just – a headache.' It was an effort to speak and the words had a tight, strained sound.

'Perhaps you would like to go home, Miss Linden?'

'Yes – yes, I would.'

He did not move, but continued to block her way, looking at her with an expression she could not read.

'There is something here I do not understand,' he said. His eyes narrowed, and he looked around the shop warily. Everything was in place.

He studied Hester's face again, and at last he said, 'You may go if you like.'

He moved past her then, towards the back rooms, and she

knew she had only a moment before he would remove his coat and return to the shop.

Her hands were trembling so badly she could hardly fit the key to the lock of the cage, and she could not hold back a gasp of anguish when at first the key did not seem to fit or turn the lock.

But it must be the key. It must be! Isabel had been so sure.

The cage door opened. The hideous toad sat enthroned within, its bulging eyes staring at her from the grotesque head. She dreaded to lift it, and it was cold and heavy in her hand.

She snatched her cloak from the peg and fled up the stairs and out into the snow.

It was hard to run on the wet and slippery pavement, and twice she collided with people walking along, heads down against the snow and wind.

'Here, there – watch where you're going!' someone shouted at her angrily. But she hardly heard.

She had not gone half the distance of the street when she looked back and saw Mr Mordrian coming after her – and then she lost sight of him as a group of young boys came out of a shop and clustered in the street.

The park had never seemed so far away, and the entrance was obscured by the snow which was still falling heavily, swirling in the lamplight. And the pond seemed forever in the distance, like a magical thing she could never reach, no matter how long she ran.

She fell at the park entrance, a sickening, shuddering fall that twisted her arm under her and knocked the breath from her body. Her dress was wet with snow, her fingers numb with cold around the brass toad.

'Are you all right, miss?' A man stopped to help her as she struggled up, but she broke away and tried to run again on the slippery snow. It was hard to distinguish the paths any longer, the snow had fallen so heavily, and the sound of

horses' hooves and wheels of a nearby carriage were muted in the snow.

She rushed on, not daring to look back again, though she was sure Mr Mordrian was still following. The pond lay just ahead now, a vast dark area in the midst of all the whiteness and falling snow, its edges fringed with thin ice, and no living thing within its depths.

Throw it to the bottom of the pond, Isabel had said. *When spring comes, it will sink in the mud and be gone forever.*

Gasping for breath, Hester lifted her arm and threw the brass toad as far as she could towards the middle of the pond, and at the same moment she heard the scream of horses and the sound of carriage wheels grinding on the paving stones of the park path behind her.

Eighteen

Hester whirled around to face a scene of confusion. A carriage had been dragged to a halt sideways across the path and the horses were rearing and plunging as the driver tried to hold them steady. A few people began to gather, and some children who had been playing in the snow came running.

On the ground, cast aside from the carriage like a limp doll, Mr Mordrian lay in the falling snow. The people first to arrive bent over him, and the driver of the carriage, struggling to hold the horses, cried out: 'He ran right in front of me – right in front of me—'

The children jostled each other and tried to get closer to look at the man in the snow, and Hester made her way to the edge of the small crowd that had so quickly collected. Snowflakes covered her hair and blew cold against her face.

The horses stood still at last, and the driver of the carriage sprang down.

A woman's face appeared at the carriage window, peering out with a distressed expression.

'He's dead,' someone said. The crowd pushed closer, but a silence fell over it now.

'Poor devil, probably didn't even see you in the snow,' someone said to the driver, who had knelt in the snow beside the body.

'Yes – yes – he saw me—' the driver insisted. 'He saw me – he looked right at me – but he just kept on running.'

Still clutching the cloak she had never taken time to put on, Hester pushed closer through the crowd. As the driver tried to lift him, something slipped from Mr Mordrian's pocket into the snow at the edge of the path.

More people were coming to see what had happened,

and a child somewhere in the crowd said, 'Look at that lady, Mommy. She hasn't any coat on.'

Hester knelt in the snow and touched the thing that had fallen from Mr Mordrian's pocket. She did not know what she had thought it might be, but it was only his pipe, the ashes cold and dead, and she dropped it back into the snow with a feeling of repulsion.

Ah, the pretty young lady returns, he had said that day when she had gone to buy the green bowl. And he had stood looking at her with the pipe smoke writhing about his face, pale and floating.

The crowd drew back as the driver and another man lifted Mr Mordrian's body, and the passenger in the carriage stepped out and stood wringing her hands distractedly.

'Better get up, miss,' someone said kindly, and Hester felt herself being helped up from the snow.

She looked down, but the snowflakes were falling and covering the pipe, and she could not see it now.

Nineteen

For the next few weeks the shop was closed. Hester and Isabel walked by almost every day. There was no 'CLOSED' sign on the door, but it would not open when they tried it.

Sometimes Hester came alone. She would stand for a minute holding her hand beside her eyes to peer in through the shop window. Everything remained exactly as it had been that last day. In the window were plates and ink pots and china figurines, just as she had last arranged them there. Inside the shop she could see the counter and the dark shapes of the tables.

There was never anyone in sight.

She would turn homeward again, walking through the park mindless of the cold, stopping to look at the deep, still water of the pond.

A sense of release would sweep through her. It was over, she would never have to go into the shop again. Isabel was back from Saratoga and Aunt Sophie had at last agreed upon a new dress for Christina's party. Betsy was still somehow hanging on, bumping about in the kitchen and humming to herself as she polished silver with Aunt Sophie's scraps of rags. Life was not so bad after all.

Hester's step would quicken with lightness then, as she thought of these good things and hurried homeward. There was Auburn Street ahead, perhaps one of the Misses Pynn stepping out of her door on an errand, and schoolboys running along with ears red with cold and books under their arms. And fires lighted in parlours, and cats sleeping in warm places, and Betsy in Aunt Sophie's kitchen.

I will keep a diary one day of all my secret loves and lock it up with a golden key I will wear around my neck on a golden chain . . . I will wear silk dresses and fine kid gloves,

and have two white horses for my carriage . . . and walk beside rivers streaked with moonlight in faraway places . . .

And then one day the shop door opened when Hester tried it. This surprised her, for she had tried it so often to no avail. She had come to believe that it would remain locked for ever, the things within mouldering away without another human touch.

The bell rang, just as it always had as the door swung in. Hester stood at the top of the stairs, a prickly feeling on her skin. She half expected to look across the shop and see Mr Mordrian again, tamping tobacco into his pipe and smiling at her wickedly.

But instead a stout white-haired man stood by the counter, a large ledger book open before him.

He looked up at Hester and said, 'Shop's open. Come in.'

Hesitantly, Hester came down the stairs. Stairs she had never thought to walk upon again. It was all familiar, and yet so unfamiliar . . . there was the peg where she had always hung her cloak . . . there was the empty cage, the door ajar, the key still in the lock where she had left it.

'What can I do for you?' the man asked. He closed the ledger, marking his place with his pen. His coat lay across the counter, pushing askew the tray of rings Mr Mordrian had always kept in such good order.

'I didn't come to buy anything,' Hester said. 'I was just going by and the door was unlocked – I used to work here for Mr Mordrian.'

She looked around as she spoke. Everything was getting dusty. There was no one to take care of things here any more.

'Mr Mordrian was my cousin,' the man said. 'I am his only living relative, and the shop is mine now. But this is the

first time I've been able to get here and see what's to be done.'

His manner was friendly, and Hester looked at him more closely. He was not at all like Mr Mordrian. His eyes were kindly, his clothes were fashionable, and the front of his sober vest displayed a gold watch chain.

'Are you going to open the shop again?'

'Oh, no, not me.' The man laughed and shook his head. 'I don't even live in Ashwood. I've just come to take a look and see what's here. I'm going to sell it all.'

Hester stood awkwardly, wondering what she could say next. The shop did not seem the same, with this kindly white-haired man at the counter. It was not frightening and eerie now, only a dusty little shop down four steps from the street.

'I'm sorry I can't offer you your job back.'

'Oh – I don't want my job back,' Hester said hurriedly, and as he looked at her curiously, she added, 'It was only – only temporary.'

'I see.'

He seemed to be relieved that she was not disappointed because the shop was not reopening.

Hester glanced around one last time. She knew she would not see the shop again. This time truly was the last time she would be in it.

'Wait a moment.' The man came around from behind the counter. 'I'm just going to sell all this stuff. Isn't there something you would like to have? Pick out something you'd like. My cousin would want you to have something, I'm sure.'

Hester's hand tightened on the stair rail. The scar from the green bowl was still there on her finger.

'Oh, no, thank you,' she said. 'There is nothing I want.'

'No little souvenir of your days here?' he urged

generously. He thought there ought to be something a young girl would like. 'A music box, perhaps? Or a flower vase? Please, pick out something. I wish you would.'

He was so sincerely eager to give her something that Hester could not help smiling.

She shook her head again. 'No, thank you. Really, there is nothing I want.'

He shrugged and smiled. 'I just thought there might be something.'

'No – no, there isn't. But thank you anyway.'

She went up the stairs slowly, pausing a moment at the top to look back at the man.

'Who are you going to sell the things to?'

'Oh,' he motioned vaguely, 'shopkeepers around here. I've notified a few, and they'll come and see what they want. I won't get much for it – you can't, you know, selling like that. But it's the quickest, easiest way. I've got a business of my own I have to get back and attend to.'

Hester wondered what he would think of the strange books and the journal in the room behind the shop. He was a kindly man, and she thought he would be puzzled and uneasy, and more anxious than ever to get back to his own home, his own affairs. She could imagine him standing in the miserable room putting the books one by one into the fire and watching the flames leap as they burned.

She said good-bye, and he nodded pleasantly as she left.

It was cold outside, and she tucked her hands deeper into her muff as she began to walk along Marley Street towards the park and home . . . *Shopkeepers around here*, the man had said.

The park was deserted. Patches of thin ice stood along the paths, and winter sunlight glinted on the water of the pond.

Shopkeepers around here . . . Mrs Banning's? Tremont's?

Perhaps the things would not have the same bad spells in

other shops, with other shopkeepers, but nevertheless Hester thought she would be very careful what she bought in the shops after this.

One couldn't be too careful.

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